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Using the Net Promoter Score to support service design: Digging for gold in customer free-text reports

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Abstract

Customer research is key to service design. However, current methods to obtain in-depth customer insight are resource demanding and rarely utilise available customer reports. In this study, we explore the widely used transactional Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a potential source of customer insight for service designers. Specifically, we explore the qualitative customer reports from transactional NPS. The study included the qualitative analysis of 1100 customer reports from a telecommunications service provider. We find that a proportion of customer reports clearly have potential as a source of customer insight, but that filtering is key. In particular, the detailed reports of low-scoring customers may provide the most valuable insight, as these can give a new perspective on the service process and a strengthened understanding of painpoints and potential improvements. We also discuss how the transactional NPS may be used more generally to assess the value and impact of service design.

KEYWORDS: customer research, Net Promoter Score, free-text reports

Introduction

Customer research is critical in service design. The design of services requires insight into customers' needs and desires, typically drawn from extensive research of target customer groups. In particular, rich qualitative data based on observation or interaction with customers are needed to explore and discover insights that are actionable for service designers (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Polaine, Løvlie, & Reason, 2013).

To obtain such qualitative data, service designers apply a wide range of methods such as observations, in-depth interviews, diaries, customer journey mapping, focus groups and workshops. While highly valuable, these methods are limited in three important regards: First, they are highly resource demanding because of the substantial work required for research protocol development, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. Second, data and findings may be challenging to structure and communicate because of their

contextual dependency and the interwoven character of the themes being explored. Third, identifying and recruiting the most relevant participants may be challenging, as knowing upfront who will make the most valuable contributions in terms of actionable insight is difficult.

Motivated by these shortcomings, we in this study explore a complementary source of customer insight for service design purposes: high-volume qualitative data gathered as part of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) (Reichheld, 2003), an approach to customer experience measurement widely used across service industries (Temkin, 2014). The broad coverage of the NPS in terms of participants and service areas makes it a promising candidate to strengthen service designers' toolbox for customer research.

Our study contributes case-based experiences on the NPS as a source of customer insight. We also use the findings to discuss how the NPS can be utilised to assess the impact and value of service design.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a background of related work before detailing our research question and method. Second, we present the findings from a case in which qualitative data from the NPS were analysed as a part of a customer research initiative in a major telecommunications service provider. Finally, we discuss the lessons learnt and the implications of the results for service design.

Background

In this background section, we provide a brief overview of customer research in service design and why the NPS may potentially complement such customer research. We also consider how customer research can be used to assess the impact and value of service design.

Customer research in service design

Customer research, whilst relevant throughout the iterative service design process, is of particular importance early on in the discovery or exploration phase. A range of methods is applied in customer research, from general-purpose ethnographic methods, such as observation and interviews, to more targeted methods, such as service safaris, customer journey mapping and cultural probes (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). A common characteristic of these methods is that they provide designers with rich qualitative data.

Customer research methods serve at least two partly overlapping purposes. First, they serve an explorational purpose, in which designers gain insights into the characteristics and opportunities within the context of the future service. In brief, it means they should enable designers to 'look at the world in a fresh way' (Design Council, 2015). Second, they help designers empathise with customers and identify uncovered customer needs, problems, desires, preferences or painpoints (Brown, 2008).

This dual purpose of customer research reflects the need for service designers to investigate and understand problems that need to be fixed and covered. Likewise, it indicates the necessity for service designers to broaden the design space exploring novel approaches and opportunities. This broadening may not necessarily result from identified customer needs or painpoints alone, but rather emerge as a consequence of seeing the customer needs in the context of changing service contexts or new technological opportunities.

The NPS as a potential data source in customer research

Like the methods of the current service design toolbox, the NPS is an approach to gather data from customers. However, whereas the main purpose of service design methods for customer research is to provide rich qualitative data, the main purpose of the NPS is to be an actionable metric for service managers. The NPS can be implemented at the brand level (*brand NPS*) and at the level of individual service processes or touchpoints (*transactional NPS*)

(Reichheld, 2003). For our purposes, the transactional NPS is most relevant, and in the following, we only address this NPS type.

The transactional NPS is typically implemented as a brief questionnaire survey following a service process or episode. Customers are asked a single quantitative question on their likelihood to recommend (LTR) the service provider on a scale from 0 to 10, referred to as *the LTR question*.

On the basis of customers' responses to this one question, a NPS score is calculated. The NPS has been demonstrated to be a valid predictor of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (de Haan, Verhoef, & Wiesel, 2015). However, to make the NPS score actionable, insight is needed on the drivers of customer experience which motivate the customers to give their scores. For this purpose, the quantitative LTR question is complemented with a qualitative *reason-for-score* question. Here, customers are asked to report, in their own words, their main reason for their score. These reports, as we will see in the presented study, are potentially a rich source of customer insight. This source may potentially be more efficient to access than other qualitative data sources currently applied for customer research.

Furthermore, the efficient access implies that qualitative data may be gathered from a larger number of customers, potentially broadening the range of the findings as compared to other qualitative methods.

Service companies worldwide are using the NPS to monitor customers' experiences of service processes. According to Temkin (2014), the NPS is among the most commonly used metrics for customer experience. Transactional NPS data is thus potentially available to service designers in a broad range of service companies. However, to the best of our knowledge, this resource is underexploited. For example, whilst Polaine, Løvlie and Reason (2013) in their book on service design mention NPS as a service quality metric, they fail to detail the potential the qualitative data of NPS may hold as a source of customer insight.

Customer research for insight into the impact and value of service design

Sometimes, services are designed from scratch. However, service design typically takes a legacy of current offerings and processes as its starting point. As noted by Kimbell (2011), service design typically implies the re-design of existing service processes.

For the service design community, such re-design of services represents an opportunity to assess the impact and value of service design, as current service quality may be used as a benchmark.

On this background, customer research in the discovery phase of a service design project may serve the purpose of not only exploring opportunities and painpoints to drive the design process, but also establishing a benchmark against which the new service design may be assessed. Hence, customer research may be utilised to document the impact and value of service (re-)design.

For this purpose, NPS data is particularly interesting, as the quantitative NPS score clearly lends itself to benchmarking and comparison. Furthermore, the qualitative NPS data resulting from the main reason-for-score question can provide insight into issues that have been mitigated or changed as a result of the re-design.

Research question

Whilst the transactional NPS arguably has potential as a source of data for customer research in service design, little is known about its characteristics for this purpose and how it may actually support service designers. On this background, we formulate the following research question:

How can the transactional Net Promoter Score serve as a source of customer research data to support service designers?

This question implies that we explore how data obtained through the transactional NPS can be understood and characterised. Furthermore, we should analyse how these data may cover different needs for customer insight in service design. Finally, we can use the findings to discuss how service design could benefit from applying the transactional NPS as a measurement of the value or impact of the service (re-)design process.

Method

To investigate the characteristics of the transactional NPS as a source of customer research data, we conducted a case study analysing the content of a relatively large set of such data. Doing so enabled us to examine in depth the characteristics, benefits and limitations of the transactional NPS for this purpose.

The case

The case involved a large international telecommunications service provider. This case context is a highly interesting one, as telecommunications typically involves a broad range of product and service offerings, such as phone subscriptions, broadband, media content, and bundled products and services.

One year prior to the case study, the provider implemented the transactional NPS to gather customer feedback for a range of touchpoints and service processes, including in-store visits, delivery processes and Customer Service call centre. In our case, we considered the data gathered for Customer Service.

The company had implemented the transactional NPS by the book. After calling Customer Service, customers received an invitation to provide feedback on the help they had received. In particular, they provided quantitative feedback on the LTR question, ‘On the basis of your experience concerning your recent call to Customer Service, how likely are you to recommend [the company] to your family, friends and colleagues?’, in terms of a score ranging from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely). Almost one third of the customers (30%) answered this question and received a free-text follow-up, the reason-for-score question, which was ‘What was the primary reason for your score?’. This follow-up question was administered through mobile phone text messages (70%) or brief web questionnaires (30%).

For the one-year period preceding this study, the company received more than 200.000 NPS responses.

Sampling and analysis

To gain insight into the characteristics of transactional NPS feedback, we wanted to analyse in depth a representative sample of the large set of available customer reports. For this purpose, we conducted stratified sampling across the entire set of NPS feedback.

In the NPS, 11 LTR scores from 0 to 10 are possible. To thoroughly investigate the breadth of the responses, we sampled 100 qualitative reports for each LTR score, that is, 100 reports for LTR score 0, 100 for LTR score 1, and so forth; in total, we sampled 1100 reports.

After the sampling, we established a descriptive overview of the reports, specifically their length, as this indicates their level of detail. The reports were then investigated in a thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2013) to gain insight into emerging topics. Furthermore, a content analysis (Ezzy, 2013) was conducted to assess whether the reports addressed (a) the *target* of the NPS data collection (the customers’ latest Customer Service interaction) or (b) other aspects of the service and service provider, such as perceptions of the provider’s other products or services, or general perceptions of the brand and company. We refer to such other aspects as *spillover*.

Finally, the reports were classified as reflecting a positive or negative sentiment, or both.

Results

The analysis gave a number of interesting insights into the transactional NPS as a source of customer research data. Here, we first present a descriptive overview of the reason-for-score reports, followed by an overview of the topics covered and the sentiment analysis. We then explore the details of some of the topics to obtain a better understanding of the feedback provided.

Overview of the customer reports

In our descriptive overview, we found the level of detail in customer reports to depend on the customers' service experience. The reports differed markedly in length. Whilst the longest report in the sample consisted of 906 characters (slightly longer than the research question section of this paper), the average report was 86 characters long ($SD = 105$); less than the length of a Twitter tweet. Interestingly, the customers with the lowest LTR scores tended to write longer reports. In fact, those customers with the lowest scores (LTR 0), on average, wrote more than twice as much as the customers with the highest scores (LTR 10). Clearly, customers with a poor experience have more on their hearts and minds than those with a good experience.

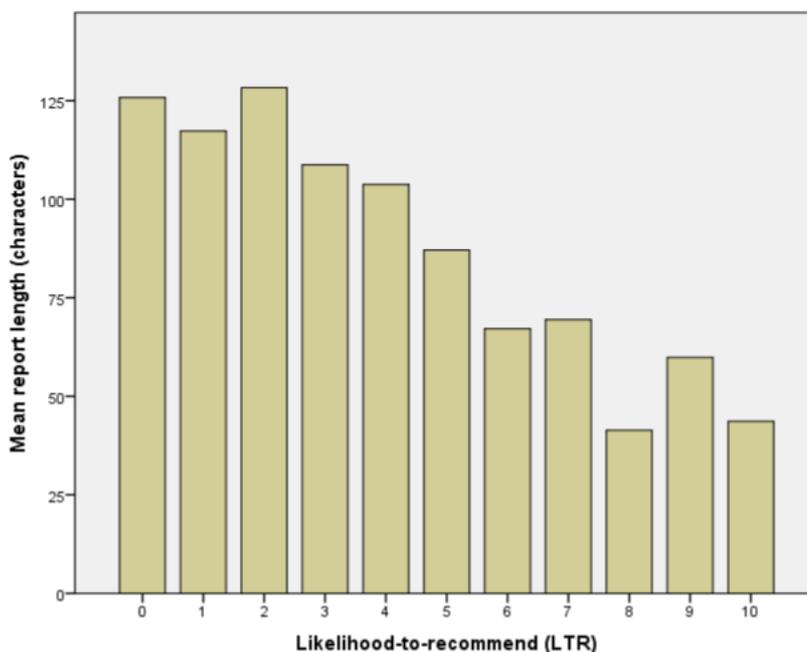


Figure 1 – Mean length of the reason-for-score-reports as a function of LTR scores

The reports addressed a broad range of topics. Whilst the LTR question only asked about the customers' latest contact with customer service (*target*), a substantial proportion of the customer reports concerned other issues (*spillover*). In Table 1, we provide an overview of the most frequently mentioned topics, as well as the aspects of the service or service provider which the topics are linked to.

Interestingly, we find that a larger variety of topics addresses the spillover aspects of the service provider and its customer offerings than those which actually concern the customers' latest contact with Customer Service. This result indicates that the transactional NPS may provide a window into not only customer experiences for the touchpoint for which the NPS is gathered, but for any part of the company or service offer which the customers consider important to their experience.

Concern	Area	Topic
Target	Customer Service—the customer’s last contact	<i>Service minded (378)</i> : The customer reports that customer service is pleasant/forthcoming (positive) or unpleasant/not helpful (negative).
		<i>Help provided (282)</i> . The customer reports to be given the necessary help or fix (positive), or not (negative).
		<i>Access and response time (191)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) the access or response time.
		<i>Knowledge and information (41)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) the knowledge and informational quality of Customer Service.
Spillover	Other aspects of Customer Service	<i>Repair (69)</i> . A previous problem report has been fixed at an acceptable time (positive) or not (negative).
		<i>Repeated calls (46)</i> . The customer reports on having to make multiple calls to Customer Service (negative).
		<i>Invoicing (44)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) the invoice or invoicing process.
		<i>Delivery (41)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) delivery effectiveness or efficiency.
	<i>Information (35)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) information provided on products, services or process status.	
	Products and services	<i>Cost (83)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) the price level for products or services.
<i>Coverage (33)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) mobile or broadband network coverage.		
<i>Broadband (27)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative) other aspects of the broadband service.		
Brand	<i>General brand perception (60)</i> . The customer commends (positive) or criticises (negative), in general terms, the brand.	

Table 1 – Most frequent topics in the analysed reason-for-score reports

To better understand which customer reports concern the *target* (the object actually mentioned in the LTR question) and which concern *spillover*, we summarised this for each LTR score, as shown in Figure 2. We can see that for the lowest LTR scores, more than half of the reports concern spillover topics. Conversely, for the highest LTR scores, hardly any reports concern spillover.

Customers who report on good experiences mainly consider what they are actually asked about in the LTR question, whereas customers reporting on poor experiences often report also on other aspects of the provider and service offerings that they consider important for their experience. As will be apparent in the following, this practice has important implications for service designers who want to apply the transactional NPS as a source of customer research data.

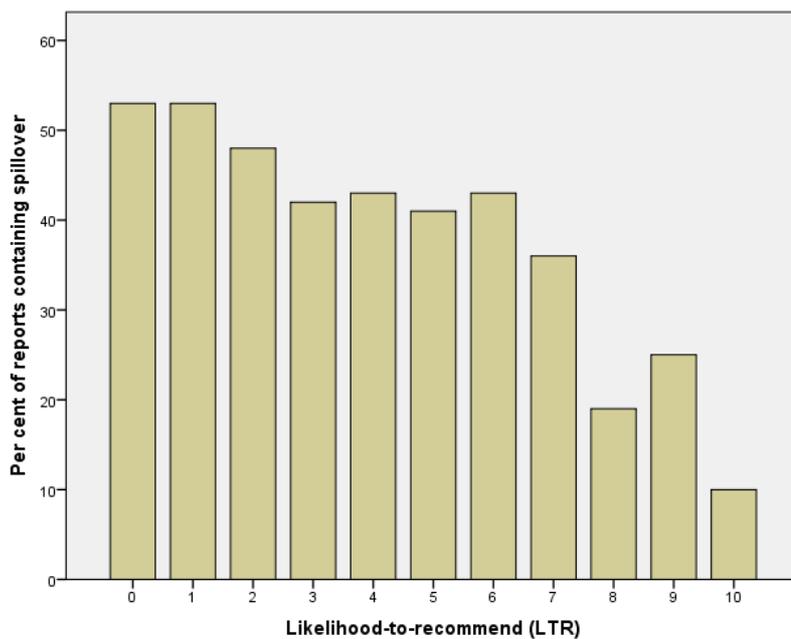


Figure 2 – The proportion of reason-for-score-reports describing spillover as a function of LTR scores

To verify that the lowest LTR scores indeed represented negative customer experiences, we summarised the sentiment scores for all the analysed reports. For the very lowest LTR scores (0–4), about 90% of the reports reflected negative sentiment only. For the highest LTR scores (9–10), about 90% of the reports reflect positive sentiment. The reports were highly polarised; customers typically report on either the things they like (28%) or dislike (48%). Only a small proportion of the reports (11%) reflect both positive and negative sentiments (13% of the reports do not reflect a particular sentiment).

A deep-dive in the qualitative customer reports

After gaining a descriptive overview of the customer reports in the transactional NPS, we investigated how this content could support service designers. In particular, we examined whether the reports could help service designers (a) better understand the characteristics of the service as it is provided to customers, and (b) strengthen the empathy with customers and uncover unmet needs, desires, or problems and painpoints.

In the NPS framework, customers are grouped into three categories based on their LTR scores: Promoters (LTR 9–10), Neutrals (LTR 7–8) and Detractors (LTR 0–6). For each of these three groups, we examined reports that concerned the most frequently reported topics for each area, as presented in Table 1. The examination was guided by the descriptive overview.

High-scoring customers (LTR 9–10). As seen in Figure 1, these customers typically provide only brief reports on a relatively abstract level. The vast majority of the reports address the actual Customer Service interaction and describe this as helpful, pleasant, efficient or adequate. The following are examples:

Knowledgeable, nice and interested service person (LTR 9)

Very pleasant the man I met on the phone. Explained well what I needed to know (LTR 10)

Such customer reports may be valuable to verify what motivates customers' LTR scores. And also as feedback to individual customer service persons or as part of company internal

feedback loops, such customer reports may be beneficial. However, as in-depth qualitative data for customer research in service design, such customer reports have relatively little value. The feedback typically concerns a small number of topics, mainly ease of access, efficiency and effectiveness in service, and general praise for the customer service provided. Arguably, such reports, to some degree, provide insight into how the service is, as seen from the vantage point of the customer, as well as give a high level of understanding of how the customer feels. For example, the reports of high-scoring customers provide insight into the importance of having an effective and efficient service process, on the one hand, and a pleasant and courteous customer experience, on the other. However, this is already well established in the service design literature and hardly serves as a ground-breaking insight for an experienced service designer.

With this said, some of the high-scoring customers were found to leave reports that do provide more nuanced reports on their experiences. In particular, the longer reports are found to have this characteristic. For example, some of the longer reports show how loyal customers perceive the service they received in the most recent call as a characteristic of the service provider, thereby providing insight into how touchpoint experiences and brand experience interact to form customers' overall impression of a service provider.

I got the answer I needed without any fuzzi. Usually, I get the answers I need when calling customer service. (LTR 10)

Always get fast responses when contacting you with any problem. Good service when I ask about things. (LTR 10)

Middle-scoring customers (LTR 7–8). The reports of middle-scoring customers are characterised as having about the same level of detail as those of high-scoring customers. However, their reports more often reflect both positive and negative sentiments and, as such, have more nuance.

Very nice and pleasant person on the phone, but was not able to fix the issue immediately. Don't know if this could have been possible, but would have liked to resolve the issue immediately (LTR 7).

Good response from customer service, but the cause of the problem was a poor system/error at your side. (LTR 8)

As reflected in the above examples, middle-scoring customers sometimes contrast different aspects of the service. In these reports, customers typically comment favourably on the customer service (the *target* of customer feedback) and then criticise a different (spillover) aspect of the service.

Therefore, the reports of middle-scoring customers may exemplify how the experience of a good service encounter may be affected by the other touchpoints of the customer journey. In some cases, they show how an unfortunate customer journey may be saved by a pleasant and courteous service encounter. The following is an example:

Got to talk to a competent and not least pleasant customer service representative today, who also resolved my problem. If it was not for this young gentleman, I would have switched provider today. Too often, the people who answer are grumpy and do not know how to answer in a customer-friendly manner. (LTR 7)

As middle-scoring customer reports reflect some more nuances, and, in particular, they serve to exemplify how the experience of a good service encounter may affect and be affected by other touchpoints, these may arguably be of a somewhat greater interest to service designers than high-scoring customer reports are.

Low-scoring customers (LTR 0–6). Low-scoring customers are not common in the case company. For the period in the case examined, about a quarter of the customers gave the company low scores, whereas the majority gave high scores (LTR 9–10). Hence, low-scoring customers comprise an unhappy few in a large pool of satisfied customers. Quite possibly, however, it is from these unhappy customers that there is the most to learn.

The low-scoring customers are characterised by having an overwhelming proportion of negative sentiment reflected in their free-text reports. In particular, customers with the lowest LTR scores in this group (LTR 0–4) hardly have positive sentiment reflected at all in their reports. No wonder these are referred to as Detractors in NPS jargon.

The low-scoring customers also have the highest proportion of spillover in their reports. They report not only on the target of the NPS study but just as often also on other aspects of the service or products of the provider, or on the provider, in general. They likewise write longer reports.

The relative comprehensiveness and complexity of these free-text reports arguably make them relevant and interesting to service designers. In particular, those reports with the greatest length and detail are the most helpful.

Put together, customer reports from low-scoring customers clearly provide a novel perspective on the service process from customers' point of view. These unlucky customers provide a view of the service, in clear words and often in detail, which is markedly different from the mainstream perspective of the satisfied majority. The following are examples:

Because we have called and complained since March. It is not good that I have to scream before you do a thorough check. (LTR 0)

Because you keep contacting me to give me offers on my work phone, which I do not have to pay for myself, but do not contact me when you change the subscription for the phone of my 12-year-old daughter without informing me via email or letter. (LTR 0)

A wide variety of service aspects and topics is covered in the reports of the lowest-scoring customers. Often, they mention more than one aspect at the same time, but in contrast to the reports of middle-scoring customers, low-scoring customers' reports typically reflect failed customer experiences both on the target of the NPS data collection, as well as the spillover aspects. A substantial proportion of the customer reports also concern only the spillover aspects of the service, making low-scoring customers a source of customer research on a truly wide range of services.

We pay a substantial amount to you each month, and then you want additional payment when the modem/router fails. This is the point where I look for other service providers. (LTR 0)

1) The service you offer costs too much. And it takes too long to get answers for something that I know the answer to beforehand. 2) It is impossible to change password to the email yourself so that the account becomes more user friendly. 3) It takes about an hour to delete 5,000 e-mails when it is possible to delete only 20 at a time. Poor solutions you offer. The service is not efficient enough. (LTR 0)

The above examples are intended to illustrate the variety found in the customer reports. At the same time, it should be noted that the topics are typically repeated; seeing reports on a similar topic together makes it possible to gain a broader understanding of a fail point or problem.

The examples also serve to illustrate how failed customer experience affects customer reports, arguably making it easier to empathise with customers than would be the case with having access to quantitative scores only.

Discussion

Service design is holistic, co-creative, and customer-centred. Hence, customer insight is critical. One way to gain insight into how customers experience a service is to monitor what they are saying. In this study, we have explored whether and how high-volume customer feedback from the transactional NPS may be a valuable source of customer insight.

Lessons learnt

To provide an easy overview of our reflections on the basis of the presented case, we summarise these as the following four lessons learnt:

1. **Potential for customer insight.** Customers' qualitative reports in the transactional NPS clearly have potential as a source of customer insight for service designers. Some of the reports provide new insight into the service process as seen from customers' perspective. Some reports also support empathising with customers and understanding painpoints and opportunities in the service process.
2. **Need to filter.** A relatively high proportion of customer reports are neither new or interesting for the service designer. In this light, filtering customer responses is critical for service designers so that they can easily access those that have the greatest potential for valuable customer insight.
3. **Valuable feedback from low-scoring customers.** The customer reports with the greatest value to service designers are relatively detailed (long length) and provide insight into painpoints and opportunities for improvement (low LTR score). Of course, service designers also want to familiarise themselves with the reports of high- and middle-scoring customers and understand how the service is experienced by these. However, the gold for customer research purposes can clearly be found in the detailed reports of unhappy customers.
4. **Wide range of topics.** Customers' reasons for scores concern both the target (e.g. the last Customer Service contact) and spillover (other aspects of the service provider and its offerings). This makes the transactional NPS an interesting source of data, as customers report on what is truly important for their customer experience, not just what they are asked. Hence, for service designers, new opportunities for service improvement emerge. At the same time, this wide range of topics implies a potential need for analysis support in order to fully benefit from the transactional NPS as source of customer insight.

There is clearly potential value in customers' qualitative reports from transactional NPS as support for service design. In particular, as these reports are routinely gathered by service companies and, hence, are potentially easily available to service designers. Granted, as transactional NPS is provided by customers in response to their experiences with the current service offering, such data may to some extent motivate incremental improvement rather than radical change. At the same time, as we see from the examples, the raw customer stories provided in some of these qualitative reports may also foster empathy with the customer to the point where radical change is motivated. Although the qualitative data from transactional NPS cannot substitute the in-depth user research potentially provided through traditional methods, we argue on the basis of our findings that such qualitative data represents an easily accessible, low-cost, and useful tool in the service designer's toolbox.

Transactional NPS to measure the value and impact of service design

The service design community, as representatives for an emerging field of research and practice, needs approaches to measure the impact and value of service design. From the presented explorations of customer feedback from the transactional NPS, this approach clearly has potential for such a measurement task. We see, in particular, two reasons for this. First, the quantitative character of the transactional NPS clearly lends itself to the purpose of benchmarking and comparison across different versions of a service. As an indicator of the

value and impact of a service design project, the pre and post values of the NPS will be valuable. This has also been recommended by Polaine et al. (2013).

Second, transactional NPS data provide an opportunity to understand *how* customer experience is affected by the service design project. By comparing qualitative customer reports from the pre and post versions of the service, the differences in topics addressed in the customer reports may indicate new benefits to the customer, but more importantly the removal of previous painpoints.

How to take up transactional NPS as a means of better understanding the value and impact of service design is a promising topic that warrants further research in the service design community. Specifically, we foresee initiatives where service design projects are assessed against predefined targets for change transactional NPS reports. Such targets could concern improvements in quantitative NPS scores, but more importantly, could be formulated as expectations in terms of how customer experience as communicated through qualitative reports are to change in consequence of the outcomes of the service (re-)design project. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see changes in service design practice, for example in service design teams working within a service provider, where routine gathering of customer reports through instruments such as transactional NPS is used to assess and improve this practice over time.

Conclusion

Our explorations of the transactional NPS as a source of customer insight indicate that there is gold to be found for service designers that dig into this wealth of customer reports. And the greatest value may be found in the reports of dissatisfied customers. Microsoft's Bill Gates is attributed the quote: "Your unhappiest customers are your greatest source of learning." We could not agree more. However, whilst we have addressed the potential value of the transactional NPS for customer insight, future research is needed to better understand how service designers should utilize and benefit from this source.

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