## What is the Barnum Effect?

* **Concept Definition:** The Barnum effect (sometimes Forer Effect) is a psychological phenomenon whereby people tend to accept generalized personality descriptions as accurate descriptions of their own. This effect can explain why some people believe in zodiac horoscopes, fortune tellers, and some special types of personality tests.
* **Concept Founder:**Researcher [Bertram Forer](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertram_Forer) originally called it the "fallacy of personal validation". The term "Barnum effect" was introduced in 1956 by psychologist [Paul Meehl](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Meehl) based on the case of the American showman [P. T. Barnum](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P._T._Barnum).
* **Concept Benefit:**Be able to identify generalized personality traits and personalized personality traits. Leverage the Barnum Effect to start a conversation with anyone using statements that are positive and applicable to all humans.

## How to demonstrate it?

* In 1948, Forer created [a test to demonstrate](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barnum_effect) the Barum Effect.
* The psychologist gave a personality test to 39 students and asked them to give answers regarding their own personalities.
* One week later, the psychologist told the students that the personality test result is generated and gave every student their individual result.
* On average, students voted 4.3 (on a scale from 0 to 5) for the accuracy of the personality test.
* In reality, every student received the same personality test result.
* The test result contained statements that are true for most people, such as “Security is one of your major goals in life“ or “Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic“.

## Where can it be found?

* **Common Usages:** The Barum Effect is often seen in Horoscope, Fortune tellers, Fortune cookies, and Magicians. [25% of Americans](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/today.yougov.com/topics/entertainment/articles-reports/2022/04/26/one-four-americans-say-they-believe-astrology) say they believe in horoscopes.
* **Need for social relation:** “You have a great need for other people to like and admire you“. This is a general statement because all humans are social animals and prefer to be loved and receive attention.
* **Need for Independence:** “You pride yourself as an independent thinker and do not accept other statements without satisfactory proof“. This is also true for all people, as most people live by their own guidelines and principles, derived from their own experience and reasoning. People want to be classified as free and independent from others.
* **Used by Magicians:** The Forer effect is used by magicians and psychics when they give so-called "[cold readings](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/www.masterclass.com/articles/cold-reader-guide)", where the magician tries to give personalized statements about a person to give the impression they know much about the person. Academic psychologists are horrified by this practice, but fail to criticize it vigorously enough in public.
* **The illusion of personalization:** Sometimes software companies like Netflix or Youtube propose personalized videos to their viewers which in fact are just mainstream content that is accepted by most viewers.

## Why does it exist?

* **Barnum statements:** The Barnum effect occurs when people respond to statements that are called "Barnum statements". These messages are true, vague, and general human desires shared by everyone. Often these messages include statements so that the reader is more likely to accept them ([Pollyanna principle](https://web.archive.org/web/20221118115544/https:/positivepsychology.com/pollyanna-principle/)). The Barum statements are things that people generally want to hear about them. In addition, the Barum statement often also includes phrases like “sometimes“, “often“, and “rarely“ which makes them difficult to falsify. Some researchers suggest that the Forer effect is universal – it has been observed in people in many cultures and locations.
* **Self-Attention Bias:** People are biased to put more attention on themselves, and forget that these “vague“ traits are applicable to the human species and not only to them as an individual. When presenting a sentence to someone, this specialized attention will often be perceived positively and the person is more open towards accepting the given generalized personality trait as their own trait.
* **Authority Acceptance:** It is possible that people are more likely to accept these statements if they come from a higher authority. In the experiment, the students trust the psychologist as the higher authority.
* **Personalized Acceptance:** People are more likely to accept these statements if they were told that they are individually tailor-made for them. This was also the case in the experiment as the psychologist promised individual personality test results.

## How do I benefit from it?

* **DO:** When hearing a vague statement about yourself, evaluate if this statement is meant to be real or fake. Try to understand the intention behind the speaker, if there is an interest behind this sentence, or if it is just an honest compliment.
* **DON‘T:** Self-validation is no validation, do not blindly trust in your own judgment about yourself, sometimes it is wise to hear what others say about you. Do not take generalized messages personally, as they are applicable to all people.
* **Exploit The Concept:** When engaging in a conversation, make Barnum Statements to start a discussion or to give the other person a compliment. As a speaker in front of a big audience, use Barum Statement to say something positive and general to the audience to warm up. When engaging with a person, use Barum Statements to give the impression that you know the person very well and create a connection to that person.