

The Use and Functional Features of Gestures in Different Cultural Contexts

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of nonverbal communication, its main types, and the role of gestures across different cultural contexts. It highlights how gestures vary in meaning and usage between Muslim and non-Muslim societies, emphasizing religious and cultural influences. The study aims to show the importance of understanding nonverbal cues for effective cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, eye contact, gestures, emphatic gestures, suggestive gestures, descriptive gestures, handshake, ethnic groups, physical contact.

Introduction: Nonverbal communication is often the initial way we connect with others, using cues like eye contact, gestures, posture, facial expressions, and physical appearance. It plays a key role in expressing emotions, managing conversations, and signaling intentions—such as showing interest or signaling a desire to end an interaction. Beyond face-to-face encounters, nonverbal cues also influence digital and professional communication through tone of voice, body language during video calls, and even clothing choices. So, nonverbal behavior shapes how relationships are initiated, maintained, and concluded.

METHOD

One type of nonverbal communication is gestures. Gestures are body movements that help people communicate without words. There are four main types of them: descriptive gestures, emphatic gestures, suggestive and prompting gestures. Descriptive gestures help explain what we're talking about by showing size, shape, movement, or direction—for example, spreading your hands wide to show how big a box is, or moving your hand in a circle to show something spinning. Emphatic gestures show emotion and add force to what we say; for instance, pounding your fist into your palm to show frustration, or pointing strongly to stress a key idea. Suggestive gestures express feelings or ideas in a symbolic way—an open palm can mean giving or honesty, while a shrug

with raised eyebrows shows confusion or not knowing the answer. Prompting gestures encourage others to do something, like raising your hand to signal the audience to do the same, or clapping to invite applause. Each type of gesture supports spoken words and helps others understand our message more clearly—especially in face-to-face communication. However, their meanings are not universal. What is considered polite or positive in one culture may be interpreted very differently in another. Therefore, understanding gestures within their cultural context is essential for effective intercultural communication. For example, even a simple handshake can have different meanings across cultures. In Western cultures, a firm handshake shows confidence, while in many Far Eastern cultures, it may seem aggressive—bowing is often preferred. In Northern Europe, handshakes are quick and firm, whereas in Southern Europe and Latin America, they tend to be warmer and longer, sometimes including a touch on the elbow. In Turkey, a strong handshake may be seen as rude, while in some African countries, a soft or limp handshake is common. In Islamic cultures, men typically avoid shaking hands with women outside their families. If we consider hand gestures, they can carry very different meanings across cultures. For example, the 'OK' sign is positive in some places, but in Greece, Spain, or Brazil, it's seen as offensive, and in Turkey, it can be a homophobic insult. Similarly, the thumbs up gesture, which signals approval in the U.S. and much of

Europe, may be considered rude or obscene in Greece and parts of the Middle East. The meanings of gestures often differ between Eastern and Western cultures. Recognizing these differences is vital for successful cross-cultural interaction. Similarities in both regions include the gestures' support in spoken language — such as using hand movements to clarify meaning or emotions. Smiling and nodding to show friendliness or agreement are also widely understood across cultures. There are certain differences, as well. Western cultures are generally more expressive, using noticeable gestures and facial expressions. In contrast, Eastern cultures prefer subtle, controlled movements, emphasizing modesty. For example, eye contact shows confidence in the West but may be seen as rude in the East. Some hand gestures, like the thumbs-up or “OK” sign, are positive in the West but considered offensive in certain Eastern or Middle Eastern countries.

Similarities and Differences in Gestures between Uzbekistan and Other Countries

Gestures in Uzbekistan share some similarities with those in other countries, but they also reflect unique cultural and religious values. For instance, just like in many parts of the world, people in Uzbekistan nod their heads to say “yes” and shake their heads to say “no.” Smiling is also a common way to show friendliness, both in Uzbekistan and abroad. However, certain gestures carry different meanings or are used more formally in Uzbek culture. A good example is the common Uzbek gesture of placing the right hand over the chest while greeting someone or saying “thank you”—a sign of deep respect and sincerity. This is rarely seen in Western cultures, where a simple wave or handshake is more typical. Additionally, pointing directly at someone using a finger may be viewed as impolite in Uzbekistan, whereas in Western countries it is often used casually to indicate people or objects. Physical contact is another area where differences are clear. In Uzbekistan, especially between men and women, public physical contact such as hugs or handshakes is often avoided unless the individuals are close relatives or friends. In contrast, in countries like the United States, France, or Italy, it's common to greet others with a handshake, cheek kiss, or even a hug, regardless of gender. Understanding these cultural nuances—like using the right hand for giving or receiving items in Uzbekistan—helps to avoid misunderstandings and encourages respectful intercultural communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Various key researchers, including Marianne Gullberg, Cornelia Müller, Edward T. Hall, Adam Kendon, Marcel Mauss and David Efron contributed to the study of

gestures. Marianne Gullberg, a prominent Swedish psycholinguist, focuses on the relationship between gestures and second-language acquisition. She has challenged common beliefs, such as the idea that Italians naturally gesture more, showing instead that gesture use depends on context and language proficiency. Using technologies like EEG and electromagnetic articulography, she explores how gestures help learners communicate when words are lacking. She co-authored the book “Gesture and SLA: A Theoretical Framework”. Cornelia Müller, a German linguist, studies how gestures convey metaphor and meaning in communication. She has explored how physical movements express abstract ideas like time and emotion. As a co-founder of the journal *Gesture*, she has shaped the academic conversation around bodily communication. She edited “Body – Language – Communication: An International Handbook”. Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, laid the foundation for understanding nonverbal behavior across cultures. He introduced concepts like proxemics (use of space) and high- vs. low-context cultures, which explain how different societies rely on gestures and indirect cues. His influential books include “The Silent Language” and “Beyond Culture”. Adam Kendon, a pioneer in gesture research, showed how gestures are tightly linked to speech. He studied how different cultures develop unique gesture systems that align with language structure and rhythm. His 1997 review in *Annual Review of Anthropology* is a key text in the field. His major book is “Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance”. Early 20th-century scholars like Marcel Mauss and David Efron compared gestures across ethnic groups, laying early groundwork. More recently, studies from Penn State (2021) showed that people in China and the U.S. use distinct gestures to express similar messages. Gullberg, along with Maria Graziano, also showed cultural differences in gesture intensity between Italian and Swedish speakers.

There exist certain differences in the usage of gestures between Muslim and non-Muslim nations. In Muslim-majority societies, nonverbal cues are often shaped by religious and cultural values that emphasize modesty and respect. Common practices include using the right hand for greetings or exchanges, avoiding unnecessary physical contact—especially between men and women—and expressing sincerity by placing a hand on the chest. Certain actions, like pointing or showing the bottom of the foot, may be seen as disrespectful. On the other hand, non-Muslim cultures tend to be more flexible and expressive with gestures. Handshakes, eye contact, thumbs-up signs, and even physical greetings like hugs or cheek kisses are more common, though meanings can still vary between countries. While

Muslim cultures lean toward more conservative, faith-influenced body language, non-Muslim societies often follow more diverse and socially driven norms. Being aware of these differences helps avoid misunderstandings and shows cultural sensitivity in global communication.

CONCLUSION

Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in how we express ourselves and interpret others across various cultural settings. Gestures, as a key form of nonverbal behavior, carry meanings that are deeply shaped by cultural and religious values. In Muslim societies, gestures often reflect modesty, respect, and religious customs, while in non-Muslim cultures, they tend to be more open and expressive. Understanding these differences is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and building effective, respectful communication in our increasingly globalized world. This study underscores the need for cultural awareness when interpreting or using nonverbal cues in intercultural interactions. VGestures vary widely between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures. In Muslim-majority societies, they are influenced by religious values that emphasize modesty and respect, with limited physical contact and specific gestures like using the right hand or placing a hand on the chest. In contrast, non-Muslim cultures often allow more expressive and casual gestures, such as handshakes, hugs, and direct eye contact. Understanding these differences is key to respectful and effective cross-cultural communication.

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