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COMPARISON OF PEACE SIGN IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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This article explores the cultural meanings and variations of the two-finger "peace sign," also known as the "V-sign." It examines the historical origins of the gesture in Western culture, where it evolved from the "V for Victory" symbol during World War II into a universal sign of peace in the 1960s. The paper then compares how this gesture is interpreted in different cultural contexts, including Western societies, East Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, and Commonwealth nations like the United Kingdom and Australia. The comparative analysis reveals that the same hand gesture can convey contrasting meanings—from peace and friendliness to offense—depending on palm orientation and cultural background. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of cultural literacy and awareness of non-verbal communication in intercultural settings, suggesting that even seemingly universal signs are culturally constructed and context-dependent.

Introduction

The Two-Finger 'Peace Sign': Meaning and Cultural Variation of the V-Sign Gesture

In contemporary globalised societies, certain hand gestures appear almost universal. One such gesture is the two-finger 'V-sign,' commonly known in many contexts as the 'peace sign.' A person raises their index and middle fingers in a 'V' shape, often with the palm facing outward. At first glance, the sign conveys positive meanings: peace, victory,

goodwill. However, a closer examination reveals that the gesture's meaning is far from uniform across cultures. The present article examines the historical origins and Western usage of the V-sign, compares its meaning in different cultural contexts (particularly Western Europe/North America, East Asia, and Commonwealth countries), and reflects on its implications for intercultural communication. While the V-sign may appear globally recognisable, its significance is culturally mediated—and a failure to appreciate that can lead to misunderstanding.

Historical Origins and Western Usage

The V-sign has a significant trajectory in Western culture. During the Second World War, the 'V for Victory' sign emerged as a rallying symbol among the Allies. In early 1941, Victor de Laveleye, a Belgian radio broadcaster, encouraged Belgians under Nazi occupation to chalk the letter 'V' on walls and to make the two-finger V gesture, thereby communicating resistance and solidarity. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, later popularised the sign publicly. In the aftermath of war, the meaning shifted. By the 1960s, particularly in the United States, the V-sign gradually became associated with the peace movement and anti-war protests (especially during the Vietnam War era). Thus, in much of the Western world, the V-sign came to symbolise not just victory over an adversary, but a desire for peace, freedom and solidarity.

Cross-Cultural Variation in Meaning

Despite its seeming ubiquity, the two-finger V-sign is not interpreted identically in all cultures. Two major variables influence its meaning: the orientation of the hand (palm outward vs. palm inward) and the cultural context. For example, in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and other Commonwealth-influenced societies, making the V-sign with the back of the hand facing the recipient (palm inward) is often a rude or insulting gesture—roughly equivalent to 'up yours.' In contrast, when the same two-finger V is made with the palm facing outward (towards the audience or camera), it retains its 'peace' or 'victory' symbolism. Meanwhile, in East Asian societies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the V-sign is extremely common in photographs. Its meaning is often less ideological and more social or aesthetic: a gesture of friendliness, cheerfulness or 'looking good' in a photo rather than explicitly representing 'peace' or 'victory.'

Comparative Analysis: Western vs East Asian vs Commonwealth Contexts

By comparing these cultural contexts, we can draw out key differences. In the Western context (North America, Western Europe), the V-sign (palm outward) is associated with

historical narratives of victory (WWII) and later peace movements (1960s). In East Asia, though the gesture was imported, its meaning has shifted. It is less about politics and more about youth culture, social media, photography and aesthetic presentation. In the Commonwealth/UK-inward palm context, the same finger position becomes a negative gesture when reversed. This stark contrast underscores how non-verbal communication is context-sensitive.

Implications for Communication & Cultural Literacy

The case of the peace sign highlights broader issues of non-verbal communication and cultural literacy. Even widely recognised signs are not universally interpreted in the same way. The orientation, context and cultural background of both signer and observer influence meaning. As globalization and media spread symbolic gestures across borders, local reinterpretations and appropriations occur (as in East Asia). For educators and intercultural communicators, awareness of such variations is essential to prevent misunderstanding.

Conclusion

The two-finger 'V-sign', popularly known as the peace sign, is a deceptively simple gesture that carries complex cultural meanings. While in many Western settings it symbolises peace or victory, in other contexts it may indicate playfulness, or even insult, depending on palm orientation and cultural backdrop. Recognising these variations is key to successful intercultural communication. In a multilingual, multicultural educational environment, being attuned to non-verbal cues—like the peace sign—will enhance understanding and avoid misinterpretation.

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