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Okay??

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The body language signal depicted in the photo is a very common gesture. In Western society, we know the meaning to be Okay. It is a sign of approval or one of general wellness. We see it all the time, and we use it often.

Beware, the symbolic “O” actually has a long history, and it means very different things in different cultures.

I looked the gesture up on Wikipedia, and after many paragraphs explaining the different meanings, nearly 100 references were identified. You could spend years just reading up on the complex meanings of this one gesture.

I will identify a few of the different meanings in particular cultures in this article and leave it to you to look up the history and some of the more subtle meanings if you are interested.

You also need to take the other body language cues, like facial expression into account and factor in the context in which the gesture is given to arrive at an accurate reading.

Historically, in Western cultures, this hand gesture simply meant Okay, or AOK (all OK). It was a sign that everything is fine and there was no need to worry. However, you need to be very careful when using the gesture in a crowd where you don't know everybody.

According to the [Anti-Defamation League](#), the sign has recently (2017) been used as a symbol of white supremacy. The three fingers pointing out form the letter “W,” which stands for “White,” and the circle formed by the index finger and thumb signifies “Power.” Thus, for some people, the gesture has taken on the connotation of hate. It was originally the result of a hoax, but for some people the meaning continues as one of white supremacy.

Still, in the majority of cases in the USA, the gesture is intended to be affirming and serves to put people at ease, but it would not do that in several other cultures.

For example, in Japan, the gesture is intended to mimic a person holding a coin, so the translation is a statement of wealth. For many people in Japan, the sign literally means

“money.” Imagine how confused you would be if you asked another person how he was feeling and he responded “money.”

In France, the gesture is taken to mean “nothing.” It comes from the formation of the digit zero with the forefinger and thumb.

In Greece or Turkey, you really need to be careful using this gesture because it takes on a vulgar meaning, as the symbol is used to mimic the human anus. The gesture is often used to indicate homosexuality or sodomy. If you were in a rough bar in Greece, it would be wise to avoid this signal because it could lead to a fist fight.

Likewise, in Brazil, the gesture has a vulgar meaning equivalent to giving the other person the middle finger.

In many Arab countries, the gesture is intended to mean giving a person the “evil eye.” It is intended to be a type of curse. It is the same connotation as a verbal put down, like “damn you.”

In the Hindu and Buddhist religions, the symbol has a completely different meaning. *mudra* or *vitarka mudra*, which is recognized as a symbol of inner perfection.

Since the gesture is made by manipulating the hands, there are parallel meanings in sign language. For example, if the thumb and finger are tightly closed and moved around quickly, it would mean something very small, like a bee.

If the thumb and forefinger were symbolically placed into a hole formed by the fingers of the other hand, it would mean to vote or elect someone. The connotation is putting a small ballot into the box.

There are many other potential meanings when using the Okay sign. It is a good idea to use the gesture with significant care or completely abstain when interfacing with people you do not know well. Keep an eye out for a confused look on the face of the other person. If you see that, then it is time to explain what you wanted to convey verbally.

When speaking in public or dealing with groups of people, it would be wise to refrain from using the Okay sign at all to be on the safe side.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language” by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.”