

Exploring Body Language Across Cultures: Perspectives from International Participants

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Abstract: In the global era, people from different cultural backgrounds often communicate in education, business, and daily life. Communication is not only expressed through words but also through body language, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, physical contact, and personal space. However, these forms of nonverbal communication may have different meanings in different cultures. This study aims to explore how body language is used and understood across cultures through the perspectives of international participants. This research used a qualitative descriptive method. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants from different cultural backgrounds, including Filipino, Mexican, and Indian contexts. The findings show that cultural values, politeness, social relationships, and communication context strongly influence body language. Filipino participants showed that greetings and physical contact are related to politeness and respect. Mexican participants explained that smiling and eye contact are important for showing friendliness and building trust. Indian participants showed that social and cultural norms shape gestures, personal space, and respect for elders. This study concludes that understanding cultural differences in body language is important for reducing misunderstandings and supporting better intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Nonverbal Communication; Body Language; Cultural Differences; Communication Practices

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized era, people from different cultural backgrounds often interact in education, business, and daily life. Communication in these interactions is conveyed not only through verbal language but also through nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and physical distance. These elements play an important role in expressing meaning and building relationships. This also makes us wonder what the essentials of nonverbal communication are and how one could better interpret other people's body language, even if the latter did not say a single word (Lewis, 2010). However, cultural differences often affect how body language is used and interpreted, leading to misunderstandings.

Previous studies have shown that cultural values and social norms strongly influence nonverbal communication. Each culture has its own way of expressing politeness and respect, so certain gestures or behaviors may be interpreted differently across cultures.

This is why it is more than important to pay attention to inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal communication and to ensure that every postural component has been read correctly (Mehrabian, 2017). This shows that body language is not universal but varies across cultural contexts, making it important to understand these differences to communicate clearly.

Intercultural communication has been widely studied; there is still a need to explore how people from different cultural backgrounds interpret body language in real situations. Many studies focus more on theory than on direct experience, creating a gap in understanding of everyday nonverbal communication practices. Based on this gap, this study aims to examine how body language is used and understood across cultures through the perspectives of international participants. It focuses on aspects such as greetings, physical contact, eye contact, gestures, and personal space. Most importantly, choosing the right posture can help a person boost their confidence, even if they are diffident (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on real experiences, which provide a more practical understanding of intercultural communication and develop communication in multicultural contexts. Many researchers have discussed the importance of body language in communication. According to Novinger (2001), nonverbal gestures and behaviors support verbal messages, and according to Sharifiabad and Vali (2001), nonverbal elements of communication help us express our ideas and feelings without words. This indicates that body language can be used to enhance the meaning of verbal messages, or even to replace them.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore international participants' perspectives on body language across cultures. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study focused on participants' meanings, interpretations, and cultural experiences rather than numerical measurement. Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative inquiry is well-suited to understanding social phenomena from participants' perspectives, while Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize that qualitative research helps researchers understand how individuals construct meaning within particular social contexts. The setting of this study was an online intercultural communication context, in which data were obtained from interview responses shared via chat. The participants were international individuals representing different cultural backgrounds, including Filipino, Mexican, and Indian contexts. The attached data show discussions on greetings and physical contact, smiling and eye contact, gestures and body language, and personal space across cultural settings.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique was used because it allowed the researcher to prepare guiding questions while still giving participants enough flexibility to explain their cultural practices and personal experiences in their own words. Kallio et al. (2016) state that semi-structured interviews are useful when researchers need a flexible but systematic interview guide. In this study, the interview questions focused on practical aspects of nonverbal communication, such as greeting behavior, physical contact, smiling, eye contact, hand gestures, interpersonal distance, and cultural behaviors that foreigners might misunderstand. The interview responses were

documented, organized, and used as the main data source. Since the study involved participants' personal cultural perspectives, their answers were treated as individual cultural narratives and were not intended to represent all members of a particular culture.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. In this study, the researcher carefully read the participants' responses, identified meaningful statements, coded similar ideas, and grouped them into relevant themes. The major themes included politeness in greetings, trust-building through smiling and eye contact, culturally specific meanings of gestures, personal space, and possible cultural misunderstandings. These themes were then interpreted in relation to theories of intercultural and nonverbal communication. To maintain the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researcher compared the interview findings with relevant literature and presented participants' statements as supporting evidence. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that credibility and contextual understanding are important in qualitative research, especially when interpreting participants' meanings in natural social settings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Greetings and Physical Contact

The interview results show that greetings in Filipino culture include both verbal and nonverbal communication. The participant explained that people usually greet each other by saying "Hello," "Hi," or "Good morning/afternoon/evening." People may also smile, wave, or shake hands when meeting others. As shown in Figure 1, greetings are important for creating friendly and respectful interactions. This finding supports Jackson's (2019) view that language and communication practices help people understand cultural norms and build relationships with others.

The interview also revealed that hugging is uncommon when meeting someone for the first time. The participant stated that people usually shake hands or greet each other politely instead. This finding suggests that cultural values and social expectations influence physical contact. According to Resat (2019), body language is closely connected to culture, and different cultures have different meanings and rules regarding physical contact. Therefore, avoiding hugs during first meetings can be seen as a respectful behavior in Filipino culture.

Another finding is that men and women often shake hands in public, especially in formal or professional situations. The participant viewed handshakes as a polite and acceptable form of greeting. This result supports the idea that communication involves both verbal and nonverbal elements. Croucher (2020) explains that culture influences the way people communicate, including the use of body language and social behaviors. Thus, handshakes function as an important form of nonverbal communication in professional interactions.

In addition, the participant explained that polite greetings in Filipino culture include saying "Good morning," "Good afternoon," and using the expressions "po" and "opo" when speaking to elders. These expressions show respect and politeness toward older people. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2019) state that intercultural interaction is strongly influenced by cultural norms and expectations, particularly regarding respect and the maintenance of positive relationships. Therefore, the use of "po" and "opo" reflects important cultural values in Filipino society.

The participant also stated that they had never felt uncomfortable with greetings from

other cultures. However, they believed that learning different greeting styles is interesting and helps people understand one another better. This finding demonstrates an open attitude toward cultural diversity. Hadad (2021) argues that intercultural communication promotes mutual understanding and helps people interact successfully with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Being open to different greeting practices can help people understand each other better.

In conclusion, the interview shows that greetings and physical contact in Filipino culture are guided by respect, politeness, and cultural norms. Verbal greetings, handshakes, and respectful expressions such as “po” and “opo” are commonly used, while hugging is less common during first meetings. These findings support the idea that understanding cultural differences in communication can help reduce misunderstandings and enhance interactions between people from different cultures (Kahr-Gottlieb, 2016; Menz & Sator, 2016).

Smiling and Eye Contact

The results from the intercultural communication interview highlight that smiling and eye contact are crucial nonverbal communication practices in the participant's culture. The participant, who hails from Mexico, characterized these actions as vital for demonstrating courtesy, fostering trust, and nurturing positive interpersonal relationships. The replies imply that nonverbal communication has a significant impact on daily social interactions and mirrors broader cultural values concerning respect, friendliness, and social harmony.

When queried about the commonality of smiling at strangers in their country, the participant positively confirmed and elaborated:

“It is typically done out of courtesy, especially in public places.” (Participant, personal communication, 2026)

This reply signifies that smiling operates as a form of politeness in public interactions; rather than simply an emotional expression, it functions as a socially accepted practice that illustrates friendliness and respect toward others. Within the realm of intercultural communication, such nonverbal signals facilitate smooth interactions and minimize social distance between individuals. Research indicates that smiling is generally linked to warmth, trustworthiness, and positive social intentions across various cultures (Gunnery & Ruben, 2016, p. 501).

The participant further articulated the cultural importance of smiling:

“It is also part of the country's culture to make a good impression on people.” (Participant, personal communication, 2026)

This assertion implies that smiling is culturally rooted because it helps create favorable first impressions. This observation corresponds with Matsumoto et al. (2012), who contend that cultural norms heavily influence nonverbal actions and frequently serve as instruments for sustaining harmonious social interactions. Jackson (2019) suggests that communicative behaviors are molded by cultural standards and principles that affect how people convey friendliness, courtesy, and honor in social exchanges. By smiling, individuals can convey good intentions and foster a hospitable environment, thereby promoting successful intercultural communication.

The significance of smiling became even more evident when the participant associated

it directly with trust building:

"Yes, smiling is an important part of making a good impression; otherwise, trust will not be built." (Participant, personal communication, 2026)

This reply underscores the participant's conviction that smiling plays a vital role in cultivating trust. Smiling conveys openness, sincerity, and goodwill, which are fundamental components in developing interpersonal relationships. According to Keltner et al. (2019, p.12-13), facial expressions, especially smiles, act as social signals that convey positive intentions and promote cooperation among individuals. As a result, the participant's reply suggests that smiling serves not only as a courteous gesture but also as a means of establishing trust and rapport.

The discussion also delved into the significance of eye contact in social exchange:

"Yes, normally you look people in the eyes, even if they are strangers, but always maintaining respect for the person, their culture, traditions, and religion." (Participant, personal communication, 2026)

This remark suggests that eye contact is typically regarded as acceptable and anticipated in social exchanges. Meeting someone's gaze is seen as a way to indicate attention, honesty, and involvement. Nevertheless, the participant pointed out that eye contact must always be paired with an appreciation for cultural, religious, and individual differences. This reply reflects intercultural awareness and indicates that successful communication requires taking into account the other individual's background and principles. Freeth et al. (2013) determined that eye contact holds a crucial role in conveying attention and social involvement during personal interactions, reinforcing the participant's viewpoint.

When inquired about instances where eye contact could be viewed as disrespectful, the participant replied:

"Normally not, although it all depends on the context. If you look at someone with "evil" eyes, or if it is not a friendly look, then it can generate misunderstandings and disrespect." (Participant, personal communication, 2026)

This answer illustrates that eye contact alone is not intrinsically disrespectful within the participant's culture. Rather, its interpretation hinges on the context and the emotional message signaled through accompanying facial expressions. The participant noted that antagonistic or unfriendly eye contact can lead to misunderstandings and be perceived as disrespectful. This conclusion implies that nonverbal communication is understood as a whole, rather than through disconnected actions. Eye contact, facial expressions, tone, and situational context collaborate to define meaning during social exchanges. This observation is consistent with Burgoon et al. (2021, p. 24), who argue that nonverbal cues are rarely interpreted in isolation and must be understood within the broader communicative context.

This conclusion aligns with Hall et al. (2019, p.272), who claim that nonverbal behaviors derive their significance from contextual and relational elements. Similarly, Matsumoto and Hwang (2012) clarify that eye contact may express attentiveness and respect when utilized correctly. Nevertheless, it can also imply aggression, dominance, or hostility if coupled with negative emotional signals. Consequently, the participant's reply underscores the necessity of considering both the intent behind nonverbal actions and the cultural backdrop in which they manifest.

From a cross-cultural communication perspective, the participant's replies reflect values typically associated with Mexican social engagement, such as warmth, amicability, and relationship cultivation. The participant's focus on smiles, trustworthiness, and positive impressions demonstrates the crucial function of nonverbal communication in forming connections. Hall et al. (2019) assert that nonverbal actions like facial expressions and eye contact play a vital role in shaping perceptions of reliability, friendliness, and social interaction. The participant's feedback suggests that these nonverbal signals are deemed vital for fostering positive personal relationships and preventing misinterpretations during exchanges. The participant's focus on smiling, trust, respect, and favorable impressions aligns with these cultural characteristics. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that these insights reflect the experiences and views of a single individual and should not be generalized to encompass all individuals within Mexican society.

Gesture and Body Language in the Indian Context

One notable finding from the interview concerns how agreement is expressed in everyday communication. The participant explained that Indians commonly use nodding, as well as the well-known "head wobble" or "head bobble," to indicate agreement or acknowledgment. This response is consistent with Dresser's (2005, p. 12) explanation that "people from Southern India often tilt their heads to one side or both to signal agreement."

The participant's response also emphasizes that nonverbal communication is not universal, as the same movement may convey different meanings across cultures (Patterson et al., 2023). In addition, head movements play an important role in expressing agreement and facilitating mutual understanding during communication (Freiermuth & Hamzah, 2023). Hence, understanding local body language practices is essential for good cross-cultural communication.

The interview also revealed that particular gestures are often interpreted in context rather than by fixed cultural rules. When inquired about pointing at someone, the participant stated that it is generally "not a big deal" and that its appropriateness depends on the situation. This response indicates that the meaning of pointing gestures may be shaped by social relationships, communicative purposes, and local norms rather than by the gesture itself (Cooperrider, 2023).

Similar findings were reported by Mesh et al. (2023), who found that pointing behaviors are closely connected to culturally defined expectations of politeness and interaction. The appropriateness of a pointing gesture varies depending on the social context in which it is performed. This study found that, rather than possessing a single universal meaning, gestures were frequently evaluated through the social context in which they occurred.

The interview conducted further analysis of the participant's perception regarding offensive gestures. They reported that India does not have many uniquely offensive hand gestures and cited the middle finger as an example of a gesture widely recognized as rude. This finding suggests that gestures carry socially constructed meanings. As noted by Kita and Emmorey (2023), gestures play an important role in conveying meaning during interaction.

In this regard, the interpretation of a gesture often depends on the meanings that members of a community attach to it. Nonverbal behaviors communicate social messages that influence how they are interpreted (Burgoon et al., 2021). In this case, the middle-finger

gesture may be perceived as offensive because it has become associated with negative social meanings across different contexts.

A further cultural practice emerged during the follow-up discussion regarding the use of the left hand. Although the participant initially could not identify any gestures that foreigners should avoid, they later explained that people generally prefer to use the right hand when giving or receiving something. At the same time, they emphasized that violating this norm is usually not considered a serious offense.

This finding illustrates how cultural conventions can become deeply embedded in everyday life and, as a result, can go unnoticed by members of the culture themselves. Larsen et al. (2021) note that culturally shaped communication practices are often taken for granted by members of the culture in which they are practiced. Likewise, everyday nonverbal behaviors are frequently perceived as natural by insiders even though they are shaped by cultural norms and expectations (Patterson et al., 2023).

To conclude, the participant stated that they had not personally encountered gestures with significantly different meanings in other cultures, although they acknowledged that such differences likely exist. This response may indicate limited direct exposure to intercultural communication rather than the absence of cultural variation itself. Previous studies suggest that individuals often become aware of nonverbal differences only after interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds (Pang et al., 2024).

Personal Space and Cultural Differences

Based on the interview results, the respondents explained that the distance during communication is influenced by gender. People of the same gender tend to stand closer together, while when interacting with the opposite gender, they usually keep a certain distance. This finding shows that social and cultural norms play a significant role in managing personal space during everyday interactions. Recent research shows that how close people like to be to each other is influenced by social and emotional factors, as well as individual traits such as gender and the types of social relationships they have (Lebert et al., 2024). Additionally, studies on proxemics have found that the distance someone maintains often reflects the social norms common in specific cultural groups (Kim & Sung, 2024). Thus, the respondents' answers suggest that there are unwritten social rules about interactions between genders that are still practiced in their community.

The respondents also mentioned that touching someone's head is considered normal in their culture, even between men and women. This shows that the meaning of physical touch can vary between cultures and is not always seen as an invasion of personal space. Research on touch in social settings shows that physical contact often helps create social closeness, trust, and a sense of togetherness within specific communities (Deogharia & Sengupta, 2025). On the other hand, studies about personal space highlight that comfort levels regarding touch and physical closeness are greatly influenced by cultural norms and individual social experiences (Abra et al., 2024). Therefore, the acceptance of head touch, as described by the respondents, can be seen as part of a cultural construct that differs from standards observed in other societies.

Regarding respect for older people, the respondents explained that the community shows honor by touching elders' feet and asking for their prayers or blessings. This practice shows the strong value of social hierarchy and respect for age that still exists in Indian

culture. Research on age norms in India shows that respecting older people remains an important part of social life and intergenerational relationships (Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2026). Additionally, research on touch practices in Indian culture highlights that certain physical actions often carry symbolic meanings related to respect, closeness, and acknowledgment of a person's social status (Deogharia & Sengupta, 2025). Thus, the tradition of touching elders' feet can be understood as a deeply rooted cultural practice that carries strong spiritual values.

When discussing cultural misunderstandings that foreign visitors often encounter, the respondents mentioned that some tourists view temples and prayer practices in India as superstition. This statement highlights differences in cultural perspectives regarding the local community's religious practices. Literature on religious tourism in India explains that many religious activities not only serve as spiritual rituals but also contribute to the cultural heritage and social identity of the community (Mishra, 2025). Other research on religious tourism also highlights that religious beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the behavior, values, and experiences of both tourists and local communities (Kala & Chaubey, 2023). Because of this, a negative view or the oversimplification of religious practices as mere superstition can arise from a lack of understanding of the cultural and spiritual context behind them.

Regarding advice for foreign tourists visiting India, respondents suggested trying local foods like samosas and visiting famous temples. This answer indicates that respondents view food and places of worship as important symbols of their country's cultural identity. Research on cultural and religious tourism in India shows that visiting religious sites often helps travelers gain a deeper understanding of the local history, values, and traditions (Mishra, 2025). Additionally, research on cultural tourism in India highlights that religious destinations help preserve cultural heritage while enhancing cross-cultural understanding between local communities and visitors (Badikilaya, 2021). Thus, the respondents' suggestions indicate a desire to introduce cultural aspects considered most distinctive and valuable to tourists.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that body language is an important part of intercultural communication because it helps people express politeness, respect, friendliness, trust, and social meaning without using words. The main findings show that nonverbal communication is not universal. Greetings, physical contact, smiling, eye contact, gestures, and personal space may have different meanings depending on cultural background and social context. The participants' responses show that Filipino culture tends to value polite greetings and respectful expressions; Mexican culture uses smiling and eye contact to show friendliness and trust; and Indian culture connects gestures, personal space, and respect for elders with social and cultural norms.

The findings also show that intercultural misunderstandings may happen when people interpret body language only from their own cultural perspective. A gesture or behavior that is normal in one culture may be confusing, uncomfortable, or even impolite in another culture. Therefore, people need to develop intercultural awareness when communicating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In practical terms, the results of this study can help students, teachers, travelers, and people in multicultural environments

become more careful in using and interpreting body language.

Understanding nonverbal communication should become an important part of learning about intercultural communication. Body language should be understood not only as physical movement but also as a cultural practice that carries social meaning. The findings support the development of intercultural communication theory by showing how real experiences help explain the relationship between culture and nonverbal behavior in daily interaction.

Future researchers are recommended to involve more participants from different countries and cultural backgrounds to gain richer data. Further studies may also compare body language in specific settings, such as classrooms, workplaces, or tourism contexts. By using a wider number of participants and more focused contexts, future research can provide a deeper understanding of how body language works in intercultural communication.

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