

ESC Guidelines around Gestures and Emoji

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Introduction

Handshapes are one of the most frequently used categories of emoji, second only to smileys. Handshapes are easily recognised, and flexible in use in digital communications, giving us high confidence as useful emoji additions. Gestures broadly fall into a number of popular subcategories like [body-parts](#), [person-gesture](#) and [face-hand](#), and [person-activity](#).

Background

The gestures fall into three main categories. Some handshapes might fit hand action types across all three. Some hand actions may also have specific meanings in one or more signed languages (e.g. the extended pinky generally means ‘bad’ in BSL and Auslan, and is the letter I in ASL).

Emblematic

Emblem gestures have a stable form that is linked to a stable meaning. A thumbs up only works if it’s only the thumb extended and it’s pointing upwards 👍 point it down and it means something different 👎 extend the pinky as well and it’s no longer a thumbs up, it’s a shaka 🤙. These gestures are not ‘universal’, but have meanings across cultural areas. For example, the thumbs up is a positive sign in Euro-American culture but can be offensive in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. The published literature on these is strongly skewed toward American/European emblem gestures.

Recurrent gestures

Recurrent gestures are less formalised than emblems, they tend to have a set of meanings but they’re not as direct as Emblems and the form of the gesture is not as fixed. Common recurrent gestures are handshapes facing down or away often being used for negative meanings, and palm up often being used for uncertainty. The ‘mano a borsa’ is a good example of a recurrent gesture - it has a nebulous sense of emphasis or trying to convey a detail. A variety of different handshapes can convey this precision and emphasis too - like an ok hand or pinch hand.

Emoji combos

Hands can be paired with other emoji. Identifying hands that can be used alongside existing emoji to denote action is of particular interest. (Will we finally be able to have a mic drop 🎤!?!? Make it rain cash 💰!?!? Offer our heart to someone ❤️!?!?).

Guidelines

Interested in writing a proposal for a hand gesture? Great! Before embarking on writing a proposal, authors should providing evidence of the following specifications when possible:

- **Emblems**
Emoji need to be accessible across major, broad cultural areas (or cover several substantive cultural areas with different senses) and have a history of stable meaning.
- **Recurrent gestures.**
For handshapes that can be used as common actions, the proposal should make a case for whether it would be better to include multiple variants to give the best flexibility in pairing with other emoji. For example, for an emoji for pushing, would both a left and a right hand version allow for pushing something either direction?
- **Keep the design as broad as possible**
While not always possible, design gestures that operate in categories such as [face-hand](#) or [body-parts](#). The benchmark for [Person-gesture](#) emoji is higher as these require gender variants and introduce more complexity .
- **Movement**
Movement and sound is difficult to represent in emoji (example: clapping). Gestures and actions recognisable from stable shapes with minimal detail to indicate movement make for the best candidates.
- **Left and Right**
Single hand emoji do not specify whether they are left or right handed, unless that is part of their meaning. Contrary to common misconception, vendors do not generally present emoji as right handed.
- **Signed languages**
Proposals that focus on lexical signs in particular signed languages do not make strong candidates, but signed language meanings can be used as support for gesture handshapes (e.g. pointing-at-viewer is also the pronoun form YOU in American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL), which are two different languages from two different families. The same goes for mudras and conventionalised sign systems for specific contexts (e.g. scuba diving)
- **Taboo**
Gestures are particularly useful as a way to express taboo or give offence, however handshapes with a predominantly taboo meaning are unlikely to make for good emoji candidates.

- **Hand & Object**

Proposals for hand + object are unlikely to succeed, especially where a ZWJ sequence could be used. For example, heart in hand could be made with a combination of an open hand and a heart.

- **Use of ZWJ**

Proposals for ZWJ sequences to make specific hand/face combinations could be a path for some broadly used emblems that include the face when the fall back experience is simply not enough (e.g. 🖐️ + 👁️ for eyelid pull)

- **Non-gesture BODY PARTS**

Proposals for other types of BODY PARTS are still open, provided they meet the [selection factors](#).