

Cultural variations in nonverbal communication: a comparative study of greeting gestures in Syrian and German cultures

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Abstract: Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in interpersonal interactions, bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Although verbal communication has been widely studied, this study focuses on greeting gestures as a key nonverbal component, examining their variations in Syrian and German cultures. The study addresses the gap in comparative analyses of greeting rituals in the Middle East and Europe, particularly how cultural and religious values shape these gestures and their impact on intercultural encounters. Using a qualitative observational methodology, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding these differences in greeting gestures to reduce misunderstandings and promote effective intercultural communication. Its implications extend to immigrant integration and work dynamics, highlighting how gestures reflect cultural identity and shared values.

Abstrakt: Komunikacja niewerbalna odgrywa kluczową rolę w interakcjach międzyosobowych, pomagając przezwyciężać bariery językowo-kulturowe. Choć komunikacja werbalna była szeroko badana, niniejsze opracowanie koncentruje się na gestach powitalnych jako istotnym elemencie komunikacji niewerbalnej, analizując ich odmiany w kulturze syryjskiej i niemieckiej. Artykuł podejmuje temat luki badawczej dotyczącej porównania rytuałów powitania w krajach Bliskiego Wschodu i Europy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wpływu wartości kulturowo-religijnych na kształtowanie gestów oraz ich znaczenie w kontaktach międzykulturowych. W oparciu o jakościową metodologię obserwacyjną, badanie podkreśla znaczenie rozpoznania tych różnic w gestach powitalnych jako sposobu na ograniczenie nieporozumień i promowanie skutecznej komunikacji międzykulturowej. Wnioski z pracy znajdują zastosowanie m.in. w procesie integracji imigrantów oraz w środowiskach zawodowych, wskazując, jak gesty odzwierciedlają tożsamość kulturową i wspólne wartości.

Key words: nonverbal communication, greeting gestures, gestures, cultural variations, Syrian culture, German culture.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja niewerbalna, gesty powitalne, gesty, różnice kulturowe, kultura syryjska, kultura niemiecka

Introduction

Recognizing gestures' essential role in human communication is important, especially in cross-cultural settings where nonverbal cues can bridge linguistic gaps and facilitate understanding. According to Puppel (2019) and Puppel & Rozpendowska (2021), gestures play a focal role in all interpersonal communication, through it, people can communicate with each other and provide many messages that convey verbal or non-verbal meanings (Puppel & Rozpendowska, 2021: 221). In particular, greeting gestures are significant as they represent the initial interaction between individuals and often set the tone for subsequent communication. Understanding these gestures in cultural variations is critical in an increasingly globalized world, where cross-cultural interactions are more frequent. The current study aims to investigate and compare the nonverbal greeting gestures in Syrian and German cultures, identifying both similarities and differences and examining the underlying cultural values that shape these behaviors.

1. Nonverbal communication and culture

Communication between humans is not limited to verbal communication alone; it extends beyond verbal exchange. Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in everyday interactions and has attracted significant scholarly attention, as it is through it that nonverbal behaviors are studied. Nonverbal communication is represented by several tools, the most important of which are facial expressions, tone of voice, body gestures, and even the distance between speakers. Culture is widely regarded as a key influence on nonverbal communication. Despite its significant role in shaping it, systematic research on cultural variations remains limited.

Greeting gestures are important in human culture. Their communicative power and importance lie in building positive potential and are a key factor in resolving tensions between communicators, which may arise within a single culture or between different cultures (Puppel, 2019; Puppel & Rozpendowska, 2021: 243). With the rise of social media, perceptions of communication have shifted, facilitating cross-cultural awareness (Bitti & Garotti, 2011: 96), as it has created an opportunity for people to be aware of and knowledgeable about other cultures. Nonetheless, this new opportunity to communicate long-distance with people from other cultures presents a chance to overcome ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers (Bitti & Garotti, 2011: 96). Whenever this reminder occurs, it is often framed within the polarized debate about whether cultural similarities or differences prevail (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978: 72). However, given these cultural variations, especially when cultural or personal interpretations of signals differ, misunderstandings can arise. Intercultural communication relies upon intercultural competence, or knowledge of different cultures (Singh, 2020: 44).

2. High-context vs. low-context communication

Cultures around the world differ in their reliance on explicit verbal communication versus implicit, indirect communication. In Germany, communication is characterized by clarity and a direct reliance on speech, where the explicit expression of opinion is valued without the need to interpret nonverbal cues. Edward T. Hall (1959; 1966; 1976) was the first person to coin the term “contexting.” Hall divided context into two categories: “high context and low context” (Kaushal, 2014: 21).

In high-context cultures, the emphasis on word choice in general and the written word in particular is relatively weak because words provide only one aspect of the communication context. As a result, how something is said is more important than what is actually said. By contrast, in low-context cultures, the actual words are more important than the intended meaning. What is actually said, especially what is actually written, is more important than the context in which it is said (Kaushal, 2014: 22).

One can distinguish many forms of greeting gestures depending on culture (Puppel, 2019; Puppel & Rozpendowska, 2021: 222). Therefore, in this research, we compared and analyzed the differences between the greetings used by Germans and Syrians. Kaushal (2014) explained that Germany is considered a Low Context Country according to their cultural context. On the other hand, he clarified that all Arab countries are considered High Context Countries according to their cultural context, where the more information sender and receiver share in common, the higher the context of communication and the less necessary it is to communicate through words or gestures. Communication, then, can be seen as being high or low in context (Kaushal, 2014: 21).

This contextual difference is easily understood by people who belong to the same culture, while it can lead to misunderstandings in interactions between the two cultures. Therefore, it is important to understand these cultural differences in order to contribute to improving communication between people and avoiding any conflicts that may result from differences in expression patterns.

2.1. Greeting rituals in Syria

In Syrian culture, greeting is not just a word, but rather a heritage. When a Syrian says “hello” or “how are you,” he does not mean a casual remark, but rather expresses the spirit of hospitality that distinguishes his people. Syrians view greeting as a value of authentic Arab generosity. Greetings differ according to relationships and situations. It is worth noting that Syrian society is a somewhat conservative Muslim society. The dominant religion in the Middle East is Islam. The lives of Arab inhabitants of the Middle East are regulated by religion, which is why many elements contained in Islam are reflected in everyday life (Piwko, 2020: 79).

In Mediterranean countries, welcoming gesture is accepted between both sexes, of the same and opposite sex, and these “little kisses” are treated as purely positive and are well-accepted norms in Mediterranean societies (Puppel & Rozpendowska, 2021: 224). In general, greeting is one of the most prominent forms of nonverbal communication that reflects mutual respect between individuals. This gesture varies according to individuals, cultures, and societies. In some cultures, it is expressed through a bow, while in others, it is expressed through a handshake. Greeting gesture reflects social values and demonstrates the importance of body language in building relationships and communication between individuals.

For example, in Arab culture, a handshake is often accompanied by a kiss on the cheek or placing the hand on the chest or shoulder, this is the means through which individuals can convey their positive feelings. These differences reflect differences in expression patterns and forms and determine the level of social closeness between people.

2.2. Greeting rituals in Germany

In contrast, Germans usually settle for a normal, formal handshake, and often use a head-raising or eyebrow-raising gesture as a nonverbal greeting in informal contexts. Because of these social differences, different greeting gestures can sometimes lead to confusion or embarrassment between people from different societies. Therefore, we can name this gesture an innocent or culturally familiar gesture, as it can be interpreted differently.

For example, a German might interpret placing a hand on his chest as a sign of chest pain, while a Syrian might interpret a German’s refusal to kiss him on the cheek as a sign of fear or disrespect. Therefore, understanding the context of this gesture is essential to avoid misunderstandings, facilitate human interaction, and improve communication between individuals.

2.3. Religious and social norms in Syrian greetings

“And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their hidden adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers’ sons or sisters’ sons, their fellow women, those ‘bondwomen’ in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women’s nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allah in repentance all together, O believers, so that you may be successful” (An-Nur 24:31, Sahih International, trans., 1997).

This verse of the Quran speaks of the categories of incestuous relationships where the incestuous in Islam is a closed circle where free interaction is permitted, while dealing with non-mahrams is subject to restrictions. For example, in Syrian society, concepts such as mahram, from this verse, define the boundaries of interaction between the sexes, leading to avoiding handshaking between men and women. Puppel & Rozpendowska (2021) also reported on rubbing noses (nose kissing) as a greeting gesture, stating that women may also do this custom, but only among themselves.

Conversely, Germans do not associate greetings with religion. In Syria, avoiding handshaking is considered a respect for religious boundaries first and for social boundaries second, while Germans may see it as a refusal to communicate. Overall, Muslims vary in their degree of faith and commitment to the teachings of their religion. Some accept violating some religious principles, while others do not and are conservative in this regard.

2.4. Beyond words: how greetings reflect identity in cross-cultural encounters

Everyone uses nonverbal communication either consciously or unconsciously (Loonan, 1994: 2; Puppel & Puppel, 2025). Living abroad is challenging, especially if you do not speak the language of the country you are living in. Small details, such as greetings, become a daily practice and a test of belonging. Greetings aren't just polite gestures, they reflect how one sees themselves inside a new culture. As an immigrant or refugee, you not only change your language, but also rehearse every movement, look, reaction, and sentence. Nonverbal communication plays an important part in any form of communication from the personal life of each person to the workplace. It silently defines power dynamics, emotional openness, and even trust, especially when verbal language is limited or strained. What a person wears, how a person sits, how a person stands, and even the way a person looks at another person has a bearing on attitudes, thoughts, and expression (Puppel & Puppel, 2025). These challenges are not always dramatic, but are often subtle, and lingering in the pauses.

Initially, many Syrians who arrived in Germany found themselves in situations they'd never encountered before. For example, how to confidently shake hands with a woman and extend your hand, when in Syrian society you were raised to avoid this, or how to explain to a German man that you put your hand on your chest out of respect, not out of favor. These subtle differences between the two cultures can generate silent tension, but on the other hand, they are an opportunity to reflect deeply. They raise questions about identity and respect, and how much a person must change to be accepted without losing themselves. Over time, the immigrant begins to adjust his greeting to suit the host society's acceptance, sometimes out of courtesy, and sometimes out of caution to avoid being misunderstood. Gestures

cease to be functional, and become multi-layered with memory and selection. While some people adopt the formal German greeting without thinking, others insist on the old greeting as if it's the last remnant of their old home. Most basic communication gestures have been described as being similar worldwide. When people are happy, they smile; when they are sad or angry, they frown. Nodding the head most often indicates "yes" or affirmation. Shaking the head from side to side indicates "no" or negation (Pease, 1984). In any case, integration doesn't mean concession, and at a certain stage, the greeting may become a bridge rather than a concession. In the market, on public transportation, or at work, a German notices that a Syrian does not skimp on a smile or extends his hand with greater confidence than he did a year ago. Conversely, some Germans have realized that placing a hand on the chest signifies respect and appreciation. This is the true essence of integration, not a concession to gestures, but a dialogue between them.

2.5. Cross-cultural differences in gendered gestures

The gestures men use differ from those of women in many cultures. There are differences in gesture and posture that can make it possible to distinguish men from women cross-culturally (Won et al., 2012: 3). These differences are not only in form, but also in timing, meaning, and context. Men may use gestures that are obvious in some societies, or even sharp and even dominating. For example, waving broadly while speaking, women are raised to be reserved and use softer gestures with a limited range, such as a slight smile or a head nod. These differences are the result of social influences that have been ingrained since childhood. However, when people move between different cultures, these differences become undermined. A Syrian woman would certainly hesitate before shaking the hand of a German man, fearing that this would be interpreted as overly open. In German culture, however, this is normal and natural behavior. On the other hand, a Syrian man might feel confused and embarrassed when a German woman shakes his hand directly, without prior acquaintance. From here, these differences may become a mirror of a deeper conflict between what the individual was raised on and what the new environment requires for him to be a part of it.

3. Research problem

Recognizing the cultural differences in nonverbal communication is vital for cross-cultural interactions. However, there is little research comparing greeting gestures between Middle Eastern and European cultures, specifically Syrian and German cultures. This gap in the literature clearly stands in the way of our ability to understand how cultural values shape nonverbal communication practices and

how these differences affect interactions between individuals of different cultures. This comparative study seeks to address this gap by exploring and comparing nonverbal greeting gestures in Syrian and German cultures, identifying similarities and differences, shedding light on the reasons behind these differences, and examining the underlying cultural values that influence these behaviors.

3.1. Research objectives

The following objectives are set to address this research problem:

1. Identify and describe the common nonverbal greeting gestures in Syrian culture.
2. Identify and describe the common nonverbal greeting gestures in German culture.
3. Compare the nonverbal greeting gestures in both cultures (Syrian and German), illustrating key differences and similarities.
4. Explore the social norms and the cultural values influencing these nonverbal communication practices.
5. Provide insights into the implications of these cultural variations for cross-cultural communication and interactions.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, collecting data done through observations. The study concentrated on understanding the cultural nuances of greeting gestures between the Syrian and German cultures. By observing these gestures in real-life settings, and everyday situations, the chosen methodology helped to capture the authentic behaviors and interactions of greeting gestures for the two study samples.

4.2. Justification for methodology

The qualitative observational ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows for the study of natural behaviors in real-world settings. This method offered a full comprehension of the study topic besides it was able to capture similarities and differences between greeting gestures across cultures, giving a more complete view of these differences. On the other hand, in contrast to surveys or interviews that rely on self-reported data, observations in this research provide direct insights into how individuals interact without the bias of self-awareness.

A specific advantage of using this methodology is its ability to capture and identify nuances specific to greeting gestures that otherwise go unnoticed. This method is particularly well suited to the study of verbal communication because it accurately captures subtle gestures and contextual factors that may be overlooked in other methodologies.

4.3. Data collection

Observations were the primary method of data collection in this research. The study spanned 16 weeks, recording 160 interactions through observations of 70 Syrians and 70 Germans. The field observations were conducted in Germany, where a large Syrian immigrant community lives alongside Germans. Each observation lasted between 5 and 15 minutes, depending on the complexity of the greeting. This timeframe ensured a sufficient amount of data. To avoid time bias, the observations were conducted at various times – morning, afternoon, and evening – on weekdays and weekends. Brief moments of nonverbal communication were observed, reflecting the warmth of human relationships despite the cultural differences between the two study samples. This framework provided a unique opportunity to observe cross-cultural interactions and intra-cultural practices in a shared environment.

4.4. Key considerations for data collection included

Natural environments: observations and notes were conducted in public places where greetings occurred naturally and spontaneously, such as offices, schools, public transportation, social gatherings, and even Arab markets in German cities.

Unobtrusive Approach: to ensure ethical compliance and respect for privacy, no audio or video recordings were made. Instead, the researcher relied on direct field notes taken during or immediately after the observations. None of the observed individuals were aware that their actions were being observed by the researcher, which enhanced objectivity.

Focus on context: contextual factors play a crucial role in the research topic, as the observations paid close attention to these factors surrounding the greeting gestures, such as the relationship between individuals, the setting, the formality of the interaction, and even the utterance accompanying the gestures.

4.5. Sample

The study observed two distinct groups:

1. Syrian participants: this group included Syrian immigrants and refugees residing in Germany. The sample was limited to the age group (18 years and above) and of both genders to ensure diversity.

2. German participants: this group consisted of native Germans and the sample was limited to the age group (18 years and above) and of both genders, social backgrounds and regions within Germany, to ensure diversity and balance and to obtain a moderate comparison with the other sample.

This study focused on native Germans and Syrian immigrants in Germany in multicultural settings. While this study highlights cross-cultural interactions, it is worth noting that Syrian greeting practices in Syria and German practices in homogeneous regions may differ due to different social dynamics.

4.6. Inclusion Criteria

Participants were 18 years of age or older, both male and female.

Participants were identified from Syrian or German cultural backgrounds.

Observations focused on natural interactions rather than artificial or studied behaviors and were facilitated by the fact that they did not know that their observation was being done and documented.

4.7. Observation design

The observation process was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do greeting gestures differ between Syrians and Germans in terms of form, frequency, and intensity?
2. In what contexts were these gestures used (for example, formal vs. informal settings)?
3. Were there differences in the interpretation or understanding of these gestures between the two cultures?
4. What are the verbal expressions accompanying the greeting gesture between Syrians when greeting each other and Germans when greeting each other?

4.8. Observation framework

Site selection: public places such as workplaces, educational institutions, parks, and transportation hubs were selected to observe greeting behaviors in natural settings.

Sample selection: observations focused on gender-balanced groups (males and females) in a diverse age group over 18 years to capture a wide range of apparent behaviors.

Instruments: data were collected through handwritten field notes by the researcher himself. Notes were later transcribed and organized for analysis. Recording devices were prohibited or inappropriate in many public places, taking into account the principles of scientific research ethics and the rights of participants, and avoiding any potential legal or ethical issues.

4.9. Elements of observation

Form: what was the physical form of the greeting? Was it eye contact, a handshake, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, a nod, or some other form of nonverbal communication? Are there any differences in the greeting based on familiarity or context?

Timing: when is this gesture used? Is it during initial meetings or farewells? How long does the gesture last (for example, a quick handshake in comparison with a long hug)?

Context: what were the circumstances surrounding this gesture? Was the interaction formal (such as a work environment) or informal (such as a social event)? Were there specific cultural or social norms that influenced this gesture? How does context influence the choice of greeting gesture?

Interaction: how did the recipient respond to the signal? Did they seem comfortable, surprised, or hesitant? Was the interaction mutual?

Accompanying verbal Expressions: what verbal greetings accompany nonverbal gestures? Are there phrases or expressions that are often used (e.g. “مرحباً” in Syrian culture or “Guten Tag” in German culture)? Is it necessary for a verbal expression to accompany the greeting gesture?

Cultural norms and values: how do cultural, religious or social norms influence greeting gestures? For example, how does the concept of personal space differ between Syrians and Germans? Are there specific rules or expectations governing greetings between genders or age groups?

Level of familiarity: how does the relationship between individuals influence greeting gestures? Are more formal gestures reserved for acquaintances, and more physical or warm gestures reserved for close friends or family members?

4.10. Ethical considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of non-observational observational research. To further ensure ethical compliance, observations were strictly limited to public spaces. To ensure the natural and spontaneous behavior of participants, the researcher was present in the immediate vicinity without informing them of the study. This approach was used to minimize observer influence and record participants' actual interactions. However, the researcher adhered to

ethical principles by ensuring that observations were conducted in public spaces where individuals had no reasonable expectation of privacy. No audio or video recordings were made; only anonymous field notes were kept, and no personally identifiable information was recorded for any of the observed subjects.

4.11. Limitations of the study

In recognition of the limitations of the study, the following are included:

The presence of the researcher may have influenced the behavior of participants as individuals naturally notice or feel that they are being watched by anyone who feels suspicious, despite all efforts to remain unobtrusive. In addition to the lack of participant perspectives and the fact that no interviews were conducted, the study does not capture participants' interpretations of their own greeting behaviors. Another potential limitation of this study is the possibility of generalization. It should be taken into account that the observations in Germany may not fully represent the greetings of Syrians in Syria due to the migration context. One limitation of this study is that it focuses specifically on the greeting gestures of the Syrian-German cultures, which may make it difficult to apply the results to other settings or cultures. Despite the sample size being adequate for qualitative analysis, larger data could strengthen generalizability. Despite attempts to ensure that the sample is representative of the population studied, the results must be treated with caution when attempting to extend them to other contexts, as the nuances and differences in the use of greeting gestures may not be universally applicable.

4.12. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This included the following:

1. Identifying patterns: recurring themes and patterns in the greeting gestures of both study samples were observed, documented, and focused on.
2. Comparing cultures: the observed gestures in the Syrian and German cultures were compared to highlight similarities and differences.
3. Exploring cultural values: the analysis delved into the underlying cultural norms and values that shaped the nonverbal communication practices under investigation and perhaps the reasons behind their use.

5. Findings

5.1. Syrian greeting gestures

Greeting levels: A scale of familiarity (1 to 5)

The numerical scale used (1–5) was chosen to systematically classify greeting gestures based on the level of familiarity between individuals. This is for an important and primary reason, which is that the most obvious observation is that the gestures under investigation differ significantly according to the extent to which the two parties know each other. This scale was adopted and ranges from level 1 (the lowest level of familiarity), which represents interactions between strangers or lesser acquaintances, to level 5 (the highest level of familiarity), which represents close friends or family members. Using this scale, the study was able to clearly distinguish between varying degrees of physical contact, verbal expression, and social norms associated with each level of familiarity. This approach ensures a structured and consistent framework for objectively analyzing and comparing greeting gestures across different relationships and contexts, providing a clear framework for analyzing cultural differences in nonverbal communication.

5.2. Greeting gestures among Syrian males

Level 1: Lowest familiarity

Although a smile and a firm handshake are common, reflecting openness and a desire to build friendly social relationships. Here eye contact occur, sometimes accompanied by a nod of the head. No handshaking or verbal exchange happened in this category. Each individual continues without stopping to engage further. The context is formal the greetings are brief and involve a smile and nod. The timing of these gestures occurs directly when they make eye contact.

Level 2: Low familiarity

In this setting, the standard handshake occurs (lasting 1–2 seconds). The conversation, if any, is minimal, such as “مرحباً” (Hello). Quick, one-time eye contact happens. The person lying down here responds with a quick smile and goes on his way. The context here is informal. The timing of these gestures is immediate when they meet.

Level 3: Moderate familiarity

The greeting is a standard, traditional right-hand handshake (lasting 1–3 seconds), with up-and-down movements lasting 2 to 5 repetitions. During the handshake, a verbal greeting occurs, such as “Hello,” “مرحباً”, or “How are you?” “كيف حالك؟”

Occasionally, one or both individuals place their left hand on the other's shoulder for added warmth. The recipient of this gesture responds with a smile during the greeting and maintains eye contact most of the time. This greeting usually occurs in an informal context and occurs in public places and on public transport.

Level 4: Strong familiarity

Close male friends or family members sometimes exchange handshakes using their right hands while simultaneously placing their cheeks together and exchanging kisses. Handshakes typically last from 1 to 5 seconds. The cheek kiss pattern is often: three kisses: once on the right, then twice on the left (or vice versa). Verbal communication is mostly relaxed and warm, often discussing current conditions or well-being, such as "مرحبا كيف الحال" (Hello, how's it going?). This greeting usually occurs on the street and in public places. It occurs in a very informal context. The person meeting here automatically responds with a smile, exchanges kisses in the same way on the cheeks, and engages in a warm conversation.

Level 5: Highest familiarity

The Syrian greeting at this level usually includes a physical hug lasting from 1 to 5 seconds. Immediately after the hug, a verbal greeting such as "مرحبا," "Hello," "كيف حالك؟" or "How are you?" follows. The timing of these gestures occurs immediately upon meeting. This greeting occurs in any of the areas observed in an informal context. Most often the recipient returns the hug and engages in a lengthy conversation.

5.3. Greeting gestures between Syrian males and females

While using the same classification method, this category was divided into three main levels, the highest of which was level 3, which represents knowledge and a close relationship between two people of different genders, while level 1 indicates the least knowledge. It was clear that there was a strong influence of cultural, religious, and social norms on the way greeting gestures were used. It was observed that greetings between males and females were more formal and involved less physical contact compared to same-gender interactions, which reflects the influence of these norms on individuals in this group.

Level 1: Lowest familiarity:

When Syrians, male and female, have minimal or no prior familiarity, if they are mahrams or there is no kinship between them, or he is not considered a member of the family, the greeting for this category maintains formality and usually involves eye contact, accompanied by a nod, without a smile, a handshake, or

a verbal exchange. The timing of these gestures is directly when they make eye contact. The recipient here makes brief eye contact. This gesture often occurs in public and formal settings.

Level 2: Lower familiarity:

When Syrians male and female know each other at a moderate level, if they are mahrams or there is no kinship between them or he is not considered a member of the family. Each of them places a hand on the middle of the chest with polite verbal greetings such as “مرحباً” (Hello) or “كيف حالك؟” (How are you?) or “كيف صحت؟” (How is your health?). The hand on the chest remains for 1–4 seconds. The timing of these gestures occurs when they meet. Here the recipient responds by placing his hand on the middle of the chest in response to the rude greeting. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as community events or social gatherings.

Level 3: Highest familiarity

Close friendships or family relationships involve handshakes using the right hand while simultaneously placing cheeks together and exchanging kisses. Handshakes typically last 1–5 seconds. The cheek-kissing pattern is often: three kisses: once on the right, then twice on the left (or vice versa). The conversation starts at the handshake moment, typically discussing their current conditions or their well-being and circumstances, such as “مرحباً” (Hello), “كيف حالك؟” (How are you?), “كيف صحت؟” (How is your health?), or “كيف اخبارك؟” (What is your news?). This happens in places where family or close social gatherings take place. The recipient often responds by initiating cheek kisses and engaging in warm conversation.

5.4. Greeting gestures among Syrian females

Greeting levels: A scale of familiarity (1 to 4)

The category of greeting gestures among Syrian females differs from all the previous categories in many ways, including expression, physical contact, and social norms. As previously noted, greetings among Syrian males often consist of a firm handshake and kisses on the cheek, and greetings between Syrian males and females are more reserved due to cultural and religious norms, greetings among Syrian females tend to be more expressive and involve more physical contact because there is no social or religious prohibition on this. For example, female greetings often include hugs, kisses on the cheek, and the exchange of extended words, which are unique characteristics of female greetings that distinguish them from other categories. This reflects the close emotional bonds that are typically observed in female relationships in Syrian culture. Additionally, females often

lack a level of formality, allowing for more warmth and affection in their interactions.

Following the same categorization procedure. Greeting Levels: A Scale of Familiarity (1 to 4)

A. Level 1: Lowest familiarity

The greeting for this category maintains formality and usually involves eye contact, accompanied by a nod, alongside raised eyebrows and a smile of varying degrees. There is no handshake or verbal exchange or asking about the current situation or circumstances. Each individual continues on their way without stopping to engage further, despite unclear interaction from both sides. The timing of these gestures aligns directly with their eye contact, with uncomfortable interaction from both sides. This occurs in all the environments observed. The recipient here typically responds with a nod or brief eye contact accompanied by a smile and a nod of the head.

B. Level 2: Moderate familiarity

The greeting is a traditional right-hand handshake, without up-and-down movements. Lasting 1–2 seconds. The handshake is brief, leaving little time for verbal exchange if so, the conversation mostly happens briefly after the handshake finishes about their current conditions or their well-being and circumstances. They don't place their hands on the other's shoulders. Where the two bodies are further apart than level 3 and the space between them is slightly larger. The timing of these gestures is directly when they meet. The gesture is in an informal context, with comfortable Interaction from both sides. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as community events, social gatherings, or even in public places such as restaurants or markets. The recipient often returns the gesture and responds verbally.

C. Level 3: Strong familiarity

They shake hands in this category using their right hands, while simultaneously placing their cheeks together and exchanging kisses. Where the two bodies are close to each other and the space between them is small. Shake hands mostly lasting 1–3 seconds. The cheek kisses pattern is often: three kisses: two kisses (one on each cheek) or one kiss (on either side). The handshake is steady, with no up-and-down motion, and lasts until the greetings end. They don't talk during the greeting, the timing of these gestures, directly when they meet. The gesture is in an informal context. With comfortable Interaction from both sides. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as community events, social gatherings, or even in public places such as restaurants or markets. The recipient often initiates cheek kisses and engages in warm conversation.

D. Level 4: Highest familiarity

The greeting typically includes a physical embrace lasting 1–4 seconds. In most cases, there is verbal communication during the embrace. The handshake ends immediately after the embrace. The timing of these gestures is directly when the meeting occurs. The gesture is in an informal context, with comfortable interaction from both sides. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as community events, social gatherings, or even in public places such as restaurants or markets. The recipient often returns the hug and engages in extended conversation.

It is worth noting that one of the greetings used by Syrian men in formal and business contexts, which the observer was unable to determine its familiarity between them, is a distinctive, silent greeting. This greeting involves placing the right hand on the chest, tilting the head slightly downward, and making eye contact with the person being greeted. This greeting is typically used when the other person is in motion, such as on their way to a specific destination. Through it, Syrians express respect and a desire to welcome the other person without interrupting or hindering them. Although this greeting is used with everyone, regardless of their nationality (Syrian, German, or other), the recipient often returns the greeting with a smile when eye contact occurs.

5.5. German greeting gestures

5.6. Greeting gestures among German males.

Greeting levels: A scale of familiarity (1 to 5)

The numerical scale (1–5) was chosen to systematically categorize greeting gestures based on the level of familiarity between individuals, as described in the Syrian section previously. As mentioned, this scale ranges from 1 (lowest familiarity), which represents interactions between strangers or acquaintances, to 5 (highest familiarity), which represents close friends or family members. Using this scale, this study provided a consistent framework for analyzing and comparing greeting behaviors across different relationships and contexts, making it easier to identify patterns and cultural differences.

A. Level 1: Lowest familiarity

German greetings often consist of a slight nod of the head, combined with brief eye contact and accompanied by raised eyebrows and widened eyes. Personal distance is maintained. A handshake does not occur in this formal setting. This greeting usually occurs on the street or in public areas. The timing of these gestures directly coincides with eye contact. Verbal greetings, if any, are minimal; phrases such as “Guten Tag” (Good day) or “Hallo” are polite but limited. The person being greeted usually responds in the same manner and to the same extent

as the person being greeted, without adding any extra, such as eye contact and raised eyebrows, and the person simply responds in kind.

B. Level 2: Low familiarity

A firm handshake using the right hand is the standard greeting in semi-formal or formal settings (e.g., meeting a coworker or acquaintance). The handshake is brief, lasting about two seconds, and is often accompanied by steady eye contact while maintaining a suitable distance without any additional body contact. This occurs in professional settings such as offices or business meetings. Verbal greetings, if any, are minimal, respectful, and concise: phrases such as “Guten Morgen” (Good morning) or “Freut mich” (Nice to meet you) are used. The recipient’s reaction, for example, is often to reciprocate the handshake and respond verbally.

C. Level 3: Moderate familiarity

Between acquaintances or distant friends, the handshake remains firm and polite, lasting a bit longer (2–3 seconds). Eye contact is maintained to convey respect and attentiveness. Verbal greetings become slightly warmer, such as “Hallo, wie geht’s?” (Hello, how are you?). Physical distance is still upheld, reflecting the German cultural preference for reserved gestures. This greeting typically occurs in formal or semi-formal settings, such as meetings, community events, and work environments between colleagues. The recipient often exchanges a handshake and engages in brief conversation.

D. Level 4: Strong familiarity

Between good friends or colleagues, the handshake grip is a bit stronger than the previous level, while the handshake itself is steady. At this level, personal distance is maintained. Handshakes often last from one to three seconds. Verbal greetings include casual phrases like “Hey, alles klar?” (Hey, all good!) or “Schön, dich zu sehen!” (Nice to see you!). This occurs at informal events such as social gatherings or friendly get-togethers. The recipient’s response often involves a handshake, friendly conversation, and a casual exchange of pleasantries.

E. Level 5: Highest familiarity

Close male friends or family members sometimes exchange brief hugs or firm two-handed handshakes (gripping the forearm or elbow). A pat on the back often follows the hug. Verbal communication is mostly relaxed and warm, often including personal inquiries like “Na, wie läuft’s?” (So, how’s it going?). This occurs in personal settings, such as gatherings of family members or close friends. The recipient’s response is often to return the hug with a quick smile and engage in a prolonged conversation.

5.7. Greeting gestures between German males and females

Greeting levels: A scale of familiarity (1 to 3)

This section presents observations of German men and women regarding each other, and differs slightly from the previous sections. While greetings between German men and women follow certain patterns, interactions between men and women are influenced by cultural norms regarding formality and personal space. While Germans have long been known for their formality in life in Germany, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining respect and boundaries, particularly in professional or unfamiliar settings. This means that greetings between men and women tend to be reserved, with less physical contact than between the genders.

A. Level 1: Minimal familiarity

Germans maintain formality when greeting members of the opposite gender with whom they are unfamiliar. A light handshake is the most common gesture, lasting 1 to 2 seconds. Physical distance is carefully maintained, and eye contact remains steady. Verbal greetings are polite, such as “Guten Tag” (Good day) or “Hallo” (hello). The recipient typically responds with a nod or brief eye contact. This occurs in formal settings such as workplaces or public spaces.

B. Level 2: Moderate familiarity

The handshake becomes more relaxed for acquaintances or coworkers while remaining formal and brief. Eye contact and a smile are common ways to convey friendliness while respecting personal boundaries. Verbal greetings may include “Wie geht’s?” (How are you?) or “Schön, Sie zu sehen!” (Nice to see you). The recipient often returns the handshake and responds verbally. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as social gatherings or community events.

C. Level 3: Highest familiarity

Close friendships or family relationships may involve a brief hug or a cheek-to-cheek gesture without kissing. Physical contact is light and quick, lasting no longer than two seconds. Verbal greetings become informal and enthusiastic, such as “Hallo, wie geht’s dir?” (Hi, how’s it going?) Or “Endlich sehe ich dich wieder!” (Finally, I see you again!). The recipient’s response is that the recipient reciprocates the gesture and engages in a friendly conversation. This occurs in intimate settings such as family gatherings or close social circles.

5.8. Greeting gestures among German females

Greeting levels: A scale of familiarity (1 to 4)

A. Level 1: Minimal familiarity

In formal or professional settings, German women greet unfamiliar women only verbally, while maintaining a distance between the two people and accompanied by steady eye contact and polite verbal greetings like “Guten Tag.” In very rare cases, a light handshake is brief and also accompanied by steady eye contact and polite verbal greetings like “Guten Tag.” This occurs in formal settings such as workplaces or public spaces. The recipient typically responds with a nod or brief eye contact.

B. Level 2: Low familiarity

Among acquaintances, the standard handshake looks warmer, often including a smile. Physical boundaries are upheld, reflecting the reserved nature of German greetings. A short verbal exchange is noted, such as “Hallo, wie geht es Ihnen?” (Hello, how are you?). The receiver often returns the handshake and responds verbally. This occurs in semi-formal settings such as social gatherings or community events.

C. Level 3: Moderate familiarity

Friends or colleagues may exchange a handshake for a light hug or a quick cheek-to-cheek gesture (no verbal kissing still). Verbal greetings become more casual, e.g., “Hi, alles gut?” (Hi, all good?). The interaction appears friendly but remains more restrained compared to Syrian culture. The receiver responds by returning the handshake and engaging in a friendly conversation. This occurs in informal settings such as social gatherings or friendly get-togethers.

D. Level 4: Highest familiarity

Close female friends or family members often greet each other with a warm hug or cheek-to-cheek contact, sometimes adding a quick kiss on the cheek in modern contexts (particularly among younger generations between 18 and 35). The hug is brief but affectionate, lasting 2–3 seconds only. Verbal greetings may include expressions of excitement or joy, such as “Ach, schön dich zu sehen!” (Oh, so nice to see you!) Or “Wie geht’s dir denn?” (How have you been?). This occurs in highly personal settings such as family gatherings or gatherings with close friends. The receiver often returns the handshake and engages in a prolonged conversation.

Summary table

Comparison of Syrian and German greeting gestures

	Syrian greeting gestures	German greeting gestures	Key differences
Level 1: Lowest familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Smile and nod. – No handshake or verbal exchange. – Brief eye contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Slight nod and brief eye contact. – No handshake. – Minimal verbal greetings (e.g., “Guten Tag”). 	Syrians use smiles and nods; Germans rely on nods and minimal verbal greetings. Syrians are warmer; Germans are more reserved.
Level 2: Low familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Brief handshake (1–2 seconds). – Minimal verbal greetings (e.g., “مرحباً”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Firm handshake (2 seconds). – Minimal verbal greetings (e.g., “Guten Morgen”). 	Syrians use shorter handshakes and warmer verbal greetings; Germans maintain formality and distance.
Level 3: Moderate familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Traditional handshake with up-and-down movements. – Verbal greetings (e.g., “كيف حالك؟”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Firm handshake (2–3 seconds). – Slightly warmer verbal greetings (e.g., “Hallo, wie geht's?”). 	Syrians add warmth with shoulder touches; Germans maintain physical distance and formality.
Level 4: Strong familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Handshake with cheek kisses (3 kisses). – Warm verbal greetings (e.g., “كيف الحال؟”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stronger handshake or brief hug. – Casual verbal greetings (e.g., “Hey, alles klar?”). 	Syrians use cheek kisses and close physical contact; Germans use brief hugs or stronger handshakes.
Level 5: Highest familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Physical hug (1–5 seconds). – Warm verbal greetings (e.g., “مرحباً”). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Brief hug or two-handed handshake – Warm verbal greetings (e.g., “Na, wie läuft's?”). 	Syrians use prolonged hugs and close physical contact; Germans use brief hugs or handshakes.

Figure 1. German greeting gestures by familiarity level

As a result of thematic analysis the table above illustrate the comparison of Syrian and German greeting gestures in terms of physical contact. It shows that Syrians use more physical contact, such as hugging and kissing on the cheek, in most stages of intimate relationships, while Germans limit physical contact to close relationships. Secondly, in terms of the verbal greeting, Syrians combine

verbal and nonverbal greetings, often using warm and personal phrases. Germans prioritize verbal greetings, especially in formal settings. Finally, in terms of cultural values, Syrian greeting reflects a highly collectivistic culture, emphasizing warmth and building relationships. In contrast, the German greeting reflects a less individualistic culture, emphasizing formality and respect for personal space.

Comparison of greeting gestures between Syrian and German genders

Gender interaction	Greeting gestures	Cultural context
Males greeting males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1–2: Smile, nod, or brief handshake. – Level 3–5: Handshake with cheek kisses or hugs. 	Reflects warmth and closeness, even among acquaintances. Physical touch increases with familiarity.
Females greeting females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1–2: Smile, nod, or brief handshake. – Level 3–4: Handshake with cheek kisses or hugs. 	Females are more expressive and affectionate, with greater physical contact compared to males.
Males greeting females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1: Eye contact and nod (no physical contact). – Level 2–3: Hand-over-chest gesture or brief handshake. – Level 4–5: Handshake with cheek kisses (close relationships only). 	Influenced by cultural and religious norms, greetings are more formal and reserved, with limited physical contact.

Figure 2. Syrian greeting gestures

Gender interaction	Greeting gestures	Cultural context
Males greeting males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1–2: Nod or brief handshake – Level 3–5: Firm handshake or brief hug (close friends). 	Reflects formality and respect for personal space. Physical touch is minimal, even among close friends.
Females greeting females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1–2: Nod or brief handshake – Level 3–4: Light hug or cheek-to-cheek gesture. 	Females are slightly more expressive than males, with light physical contact in close relationships.
Males greeting females	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level 1: Nod or brief handshake – Level 2–3: Light handshake or brief hug (close friends). 	Influenced by cultural norms of formality and respect for personal space, especially in professional settings.

Figure 3. German greeting gestures

Aspect	Syrian culture	German culture	Explanation
Physical contact	– High levels of physical touch (e.g., hugs, cheek kisses) among same genders and close opposite genders.	– Minimal physical touch, even among same genders. Opposite genders maintain greater distance.	Syrians value warmth and closeness; Germans prioritize formality and personal space.
Formality	– Greetings are warm and expressive, even in formal settings.	– Greetings are formal and reserved, especially in professional or unfamiliar settings.	Syrian culture is high-context and collectivist; German culture is low-context and individualist.
Gender norms	– Strong influence of cultural and religious norms limits physical contact between males and females.	– Cultural norms emphasize equality and respect, but physical contact is still minimal between genders.	Syrian norms are more restrictive; German norms are more egalitarian but still reserved.
Verbal greetings	– Verbal greetings are warm and personal (e.g., “كيف حالك؟”).	– Verbal greetings are polite and concise (e.g., “Guten Tag”).	Syrians use greetings to build relationships; Germans use greetings to maintain formality and respect.

Figure 4. Key differences between Syrian and German genders

5.9. Summary of gender differences

1. Syrian culture:

Greetings are warmer and more physical, especially between the genders. Men and women exchange greetings more formally, with limited physical contact due to cultural and religious norms. Women are more expressive and affectionate in their greetings than men.

2. German culture:

Greetings are more formal and reserved, with limited or even rare physical contact between the genders. Men and women exchange greetings with respect for personal space, especially in professional settings. Women are slightly more expressive than men, but physical contact remains limited.

Familiarity Level	Syrian Culture	German Culture
1 (Strangers)	✓ x x x x (1/5)	x x x x x (0/5)
2 (Acquaintances)	✓✓✓ x x x (2/5)	✓ x x x x (1/5)
3 (Colleagues)	✓✓✓✓ x x (3/5)	✓✓✓ x x x (2/5)
4 (Friends)	✓✓✓✓✓ x (4/5)	✓✓✓✓ x x (3/5)
5 (Family)	✓✓✓✓✓✓ (5/5)	✓✓✓✓✓ x (4/5)

Figure 5. Comparative intensity of physical contact across familiarity

✓ = Physical contact (handshake, hug, cheek kiss)

* = No/minimal contact (nod, verbal only)

This chart showing the Syrians consistently show higher physical contact at all familiarity levels.

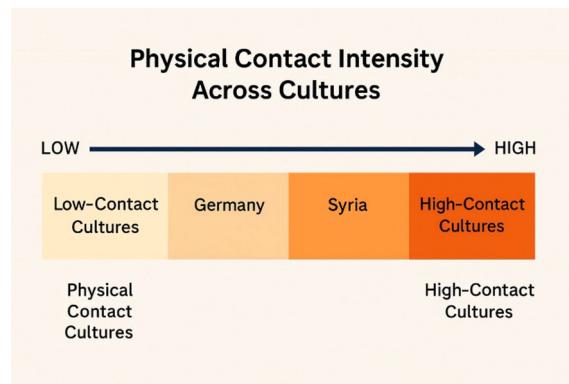


Figure 6.

Thematic analysis of the observations shows that Syrians consistently exhibit higher levels of physical contact across all levels of familiarity compared to Germans. This finding supports the hypothesis that Syrian culture is classified as high-contact, as stated in the literature review, while German culture is also classified based on the analysis as low-contact.

6. Research findings

The collected data shows clear differences in greeting gestures between Syrian and German participants, reflecting their respective cultural, social, and religious values. In Syrian culture, the gesture is warmer in terms of physical contact,

especially between people of the same sex. This is represented in strong handshakes, frequent kisses on the cheeks, hugs, and placing a hand on the shoulder. The greater the degree of familiarity, the greater the physical contact. In German culture, however, reserve is demonstrated and physical distance is maintained. Handshakes, direct eye contact, and a verbal greeting are the most common forms. Conversely, hugs and kisses on the cheek are limited to very close relationships, such as those with very close friends and family. In terms of religious and cultural influence, social norms and religious practices play a significant role in determining the form of Syrian greetings, especially between people of different genders, where physical contact is avoided, it is worth noting that greetings become more formal. We can say that Syrian men greet men warmly, with obvious physical contact such as kissing on the cheek, placing a hand on the shoulder, or hugging. As for women with women, the greeting is more emotional, with frequent hugs and kisses. For Syrian men with women, the greeting is more formal, with physical contact avoided for religious and social reasons. On the other hand, German men's greetings to men are formal, with hugs rarely occurring, or placing a hand on the shoulder, which is considered a high level of intimacy. As for German women, their greetings are warmer than those of German men, including a light hug or a quick kiss. For German men with women, the greeting is somewhat neutral, with a light handshake and avoidance of excessive physical contact. We can say that greetings in Syria reflect the emotional, collectivist nature of society, where greetings are considered the most important means of conveying respect and appreciation between individuals. We can also say that in Germany, greetings reflect the nature of an individualistic, unemotional society where greetings focus on maintaining competence and respect while respecting personal boundaries.

Conclusions

This study confirmed that there are significant differences in greeting gestures between Syrian and German cultures. These differences are based on social, religious, and cultural factors. While Syrian greetings tend to be more affectionate and involve close physical contact, especially between members of the same sex, German greetings tend to be more formal and reserved, maintaining greater distance between individuals. These differences reflect the core values of both Syrian and German cultures, warmth and interconnectedness in Syria, versus respect for privacy in Germany. Understanding these differences is essential for promoting effective cross-cultural communication and avoiding misunderstandings in interactions between individuals in all contexts. We can conclude that greeting gestures are simply a reflection of cultural and religious identity and shared values within a society, rather than a social norm. Therefore, learning these differences can contribute to building bridges between different cultures.

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