

¡I'll Give You a Thumbs-Up!

On February 9, 2009, Facebook officially rolled out its thumbs-up "Like" button after a two-year period of development that started out with an "Awesome" button showing a heart or star image before engineers settled on that thumb, which originally had been a left-hand thumb but was later changed to a right-hand thumb. The thumbs-up sign has become emblematic of Facebook as well as, as the Google AI puts it:

The Facebook "Like" button profoundly re-engineered how humans communicate, consume media, and value themselves online. By introducing a frictionless, one-click mechanism for validation, it fundamentally shifted the architecture of the modern internet.

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For the first time, popularity, friendship, and social approval were publicly counted and displayed in real time, contributing heavily to modern social media anxiety and comparison culture.

So where did that click-bait thumbs-up emoji come from? (As you can imagine, there is an extensive online discussion of this topic—anyone wanting to go down this rabbit hole should start with the Wikipedia “Thumb signal” page.)



Jean-Leon Gerome, *Pollice Verso*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 96.5 cm × 149.2 cm. Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona.

Most people assume that this thumbs gesture originated in the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, where a thumbs-up is thought to have indicated that the audience/emperor

wanted the victorious gladiator to spare the life of the defeated one and a thumbs-down gesture to have indicated that they wanted him dispatched—an interpretation exemplified in Jean-Leon Gerome's 1872 painting *Pollice Verso*, where the Vestal Virgins and others give a thumbs-down to encourage the watching emperor to allow the victorious *murmillo* to plunge his sword into the defeated *retiarius*. The popular idea that the thumbs-up/thumbs-down gesture originated in Roman gladiatorial games was reinforced by the 2000 Academy-Award-winning Ridley-Scott-directed movie *Gladiator*, where the general-turned-gladiator-slave Maximus (played by Russell Crowe) refuses the thumbs-down command issued by the Emperor Commodus (played by Joaquin Phoenix) to kill a fellow gladiator.*

By the time that *Gladiator* came out, scholars had already known that the Romans did *not* use a thumbs-down gesture (cf. Grout, n.d.). The *pollice verso* referred to in Juvenal's *Satires* (III.36) as the gesture the crowd uses when it wants a defeated gladiator to be dispatched simply means “turned thumb”, not “thumbs down”. The thumb, for Romans attending a gladiatorial game, was emblematic of the sword; showing a thumb, in whatever direction—up or down—meant that one wanted the sword to be used to kill the defeated gladiator. Those who wanted his life to be spared used a *pollices premere*, a “pressed thumb”—i.e. a closed fist with no thumb showing.

In 1979, Desmond Morris *et al.* published an idiosyncratic volume, *Gestures: Their Origin and Meanings*. In their “The Thumb Up” chapter of this book, Morris *et al.* note that the thumbs-up as meaning “Good” or “Okay” was, according to the informants they interviewed from Scotland to Turkey, predominately to be found in northern Europe, while in southern Europe a thumbs-up was generally taken to be an obscene, phallic, “Up Yours” gesture. They suggested that this distribution argued against a “Roman arena” origin of the gesture. Morris *et al.* cutely suggest:

It is not safe to use the 'thumbing-a-lift' gesture in either Sardinia or Greece. The message transmitted to the passing drivers by the hopeful figures at the roadside is not 'please help us', but 'get stuffed', and does not encourage drivers to stop, except to pick a fight. Our figures show that, although both the insult meaning and the O.K. meaning are present in these countries, in southern Sardinia and northern Greece the obscene insult is dominant.

* I remember that, in the Roman Art and Archaeology courses I gave after *Gladiator* came out, I had to take valuable class time to explain that the Romans did not use the thumbs-down sign and that Commodus did not die fighting in the gladiatorial arena. While that was irritating enough, it was not as bad as the contortions I had to go through in class after the atrocious 2004 Wolfgang-Peterson-directed movie *Troy* was released, when I had to explain that, in Homer's epic, Agamemnon was not killed by Briseis at Troy, an act that would have negated subsequent Attic tragedies. I am just glad that I had retired from teaching before the even more atrocious 2026 Christopher-Nolan movie *The Odyssey* appeared on our screens.

Furthermore, with the addition of the upward jerking movement, shared by both the insult and the true hitch-hiking gestures, but absent from the O.K. version, far more people in those countries would see the action in its obscene role, and the hitch-hiking tourist would do well to imitate the local hitch-hikers, and adopt the loosely waved, flat hand gesture we observed at Sardinian and Greek roadsides.



The obscene version of the thumb up gesture, used here in southern Sardinia

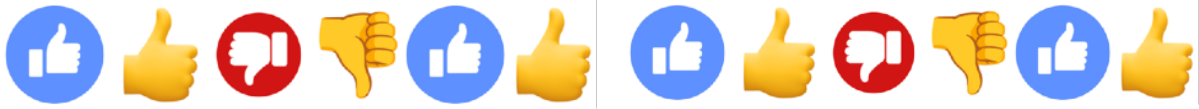
From Morris *et al.*, 1979.

In his 2007 *Guardian* article, “Top 10 travel faux pas,” Mark McCrum made a similar warning:

Here in the UK the cheery thumbs-up sign is an easy way to show you're having a good time or that everything's OK. Not so in Iran, where the very same gesture is called the *bilakh* and is an unquestioned insult, with the literal meaning of "sit on this!"

[I remember being told when I was digging in Libya never to use a thumbs-up or to wave at anyone with an open palm, which was how one indicated a hostile "*khamisa fi ainek*" –“five [fingers] in your eye”.]

Okay, I get it. 23andMe has shown me that my DNA ancestry comes almost exclusively from a small region of western Scotland, centered around the MacLellan's Castle in Kirkcudbright. And I get it, I spent most of my life in the United States, and I have been on Facebook for more than a decade. But I also spent much of the fifty years of my professional life digging at sites on or very near the Mediterranean. After living in Greece for four years and digging on the island of Cyprus for seventeen summers, I have come to view myself as “generally Mediterranean”. So, if you like this essay, please, please, do not give me that blasted thumbs-up!



James Grout, n.d., “Pollice Verso,” *Encyclopædia Romana*, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/polliceverso.html. Accessed 23 Sep. 2026.

Mark McCrum, “Top 10 travel faux pas,” *The Guardian*, Mon 15 Oct 2007.

Desmond Morris, Peter Collett, Peter Marsh, and Marie O’Shaughnessy, *Gestures: Their Origin and Meanings*, 1979.