

From Symbol to Strategy: Using Semiotic Insights to Strengthen Christian–Muslim Peacebuilding Programs

SHIMA AHADI

Full-time Faculty Member

Humanities Research Center- Peace & Conflict Studies Incubator

Department of Sociology- Faculty of Humanities

Nuvien Institute of Education / Tehran- Iran

Abstract

Traditional Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs have long relied on verbal dialogue, theological exchange, and structured workshops. While valuable, these approaches often achieve limited emotional resonance, grassroots ownership, and long-term sustainability. This study introduces a semiotic lens to peacebuilding, demonstrating that religious symbols are not merely decorative but powerful strategic resources that can be intentionally redesigned to enhance relational transformation and program effectiveness. Grounded in social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and relational peacebuilding theory, the research proposes a practical “Symbol-to-Strategy” model for practitioners.

Through a qualitative metasynthesis of 16 studies (2015–2023) and secondary analysis of eight active Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs across Europe, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, the study identifies four strategic applications of semiotics: symbolic hybridization for building common ground, affective performativity for emotional connection, narrative re-framing for shifting conflict stories, and contextual adaptation for cultural relevance. Programs incorporating deliberate semiotic design showed significantly higher participant engagement, improved intergroup attitudes, and greater sustainability compared to traditional text-based models.

This article offers concrete guidelines for assessing, redesigning, and evaluating religious symbols within peacebuilding architecture, with special attention to ethical considerations, power dynamics, and minority sensitivity. The “Symbol-to-Strategy” model provides practitioners with actionable tools to make programs more culturally resonant, emotionally impactful, and effective. Implications for program design, facilitator training, monitoring and evaluation, and donor strategies are discussed in detail.

Keywords: Semiotics in Peacebuilding, Christian–Muslim Relations, Symbolic Redesign, Multimodal Peacebuilding, Interfaith Program Design

Introduction

Traditional Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs have long emphasized verbal dialogue, theological exchange, and structured workshops as primary methods for fostering understanding and reducing conflict. For decades, these approaches have formed the backbone of interfaith initiatives worldwide, bringing together religious leaders, scholars, NGO representatives, and selected community members to discuss doctrine, shared ethical values, historical grievances, and pathways to reconciliation. In many cases, these programs have produced meaningful outcomes in elite and institutional settings — generating high-level declarations, policy recommendations, localized agreements, and networks of trusted interlocutors. However, despite these achievements, such initiatives frequently struggle to achieve deep grassroots impact, emotional resonance, and long-term sustainability among ordinary community members who live daily with the realities of religious difference. Many programs remain confined to intellectual discussion or formal events held in conference halls, hotels, or academic institutions, failing to address the symbolic, affective, and cultural dimensions of religious identity that profoundly shape how ordinary people experience and relate to the religious “other.” Participants often leave these programs with increased cognitive knowledge but unchanged hearts, behaviors, or everyday relationships. In contexts where religious identity is deeply felt rather than merely thought, this persistent gap between head and heart significantly limits the transformative potential of conventional peacebuilding efforts.

In a world where religious symbols carry immense emotional, social, cultural, and political power, overlooking their strategic potential represents a significant missed opportunity. Symbols are not neutral or peripheral elements in human experience. They evoke deep-seated feelings, shape collective memory, signal belonging or exclusion, trigger historical associations, and influence behavior in ways that rational dialogue and theological debate alone rarely achieve. A simple cross, a crescent and star, a piece of calligraphy, or a shared peace icon can instantly trigger complex emotional responses — pride, fear, solidarity, suspicion, comfort, or threat — that verbal explanations often fail to address or transform. When left unexamined or taken for granted, these symbols frequently reinforce stereotypes, historical grievances, psychological boundaries, and cycles of mistrust. When deliberately redesigned through thoughtful multimodal strategies, however, they can become powerful vehicles for connection, empathy, healing, and shared identity. This study argues that religious symbols are not peripheral decorative elements or inevitable sources of division but powerful strategic resources that can be intentionally redesigned to strengthen peacebuilding outcomes. It proposes a semiotic approach to peacebuilding and introduces the “Symbol-to-Strategy” model as a practical, actionable framework for practitioners working in Christian–Muslim contexts.

The central premise is both straightforward and transformative: symbols shape how people perceive, feel, and relate to the religious “other.” When left unexamined or taken for granted, religious symbols often reinforce stereotypes, boundaries, and historical grievances. When deliberately redesigned through multimodal strategies — combining visual, textual, sonic, gestural, and performative elements — they can become powerful

vehicles for connection, empathy, and shared identity. Social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005) provides the theoretical foundation for this approach, demonstrating that symbols are malleable resources that social actors can actively redesign to achieve new relational and social purposes. Rather than viewing symbols as fixed theological anchors that must be defended or avoided, social semiotics treats them as dynamic resources that can be recontextualized, blended, re-performed, and re-signified to serve constructive peacebuilding goals. When combined with relational peacebuilding principles that prioritize everyday interactions, emotional bonds, and the gradual transformation of relationships rather than the immediate resolution of doctrinal differences, this perspective offers a fresh and practical way to enhance program effectiveness, cultural relevance, and long-term sustainability.

The need for such a framework is urgent and growing. Christian–Muslim relations remain strained in many regions due to historical grievances, media portrayals, geopolitical tensions, economic competition, and local power dynamics. Traditional peacebuilding programs often reach only a small, already-motivated segment of communities, leaving the majority untouched or skeptical. Youth, who represent both the future and a large demographic in many conflict-affected areas, are frequently under-engaged or involved only superficially in existing initiatives. Digital platforms have created new spaces for interaction but have also amplified division through algorithmic bias and echo chambers. A semiotic approach addresses these challenges by working with the symbolic language that people actually use and respond to in their daily lives — making peacebuilding more accessible, emotionally resonant, culturally grounded, and scalable in the digital age.

This study synthesizes evidence from 16 qualitative studies and analyzes eight active Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs across different regions to demonstrate how symbolic redesign can be systematically incorporated into program design, implementation, and evaluation. It shows that initiatives using hybrid symbols, affective rituals, narrative reframing, and contextual adaptation consistently achieve stronger participant engagement, improved intergroup attitudes, deeper emotional connection, and greater long-term sustainability compared to traditional text-based or dialogue-only models. The “Symbol-to-Strategy” model translates these insights into practical guidance for assessment, redesign, implementation, and evaluation of peacebuilding programs. It offers practitioners a structured yet flexible process for auditing existing symbols, identifying opportunities for redesign, and integrating multimodal strategies throughout the program lifecycle — from initial design to monitoring and evaluation.

The significance of this work extends far beyond academic interest. As societies worldwide grapple with increasing religious diversity, digital polarization, youth disengagement, and the need for sustainable social cohesion, understanding how symbols can be strategically leveraged offers a promising pathway for more effective, culturally intelligent, and emotionally resonant peacebuilding. By centering the symbolic dimension, practitioners can create programs that resonate more deeply with participants’ cultural and emotional realities. This approach is particularly valuable in contexts involving religious minorities, where visibility, safety, cultural authenticity, and power dynamics are critical concerns. It

also responds to the growing recognition that peacebuilding must be not only intellectually sound but also affectively compelling and culturally embedded if it is to succeed at the grassroots level in the twenty-first century.

The article is structured as follows. The next sections present the research questions and objectives, provide a systematic review of the relevant literature, detail the mixed methodology combining metasynthesis and case analysis, report the key findings and the proposed “Symbol-to-Strategy” model, discuss theoretical and practical implications, and conclude with recommendations for practitioners, trainers, donors, and future research. Through this process, the study aims to bridge the gap between semiotic theory and peacebuilding practice, offering both conceptual innovation and actionable tools for strengthening Christian–Muslim peace efforts in divided societies around the world.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three focused research questions that bridge theory and practice in Christian–Muslim peacebuilding.

1. How are religious symbols currently used (or underutilized) in existing Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs?
2. In what ways can semiotic insights be applied to strengthen program design, engagement, and outcomes?
3. What practical strategies and ethical considerations emerge when translating semiotic theory into peacebuilding practice?

Research Objectives

Aligned with the research questions, this study pursues three primary objectives.

1. To analyze current uses of symbols in Christian–Muslim peacebuilding programs.
2. To develop a practical “Symbol-to-Strategy” framework informed by social semiotics.
3. To provide actionable recommendations for practitioners, trainers, and donors.

Review of the Literature

Section 1: Theoretical Foundations

Social semiotics and performative theory form the bedrock for understanding how youth engage in interfaith activism through multimodal means. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) established that communication is fundamentally multimodal, operating through ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Their work shows that meaning arises not from single modes but from the orchestrated interplay of visual, textual, sonic, gestural, and spatial resources. Kress (2010) advanced this by introducing *design* as the active, agentive process through which individuals creatively reshape available semiotic materials to meet new social and political needs. Van Leeuwen (2005) emphasized that every

semiotic choice carries ideological weight, enabling actors to challenge or reinforce power relations through deliberate aesthetic and compositional decisions. These concepts are highly relevant to youth interfaith activism, where young people frequently transform traditional religious symbols into hybrid forms that convey messages of connection, respect, and shared possibility rather than exclusion or superiority (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Moore de Luca, 2018).

Performative theory complements social semiotics by focusing on enactment rather than representation. Butler (1990) argued that identities are constituted through repeated performances that “cite” existing norms while potentially subverting them. Schechner (2013) described performance as “twice-behaved behavior” — restored and transformed through repetition. In interfaith contexts, these theories suggest that youth performances of hybrid symbols (e.g., blended prayer gestures, joint ritual acts captured on video, or collaborative storytelling) both cite traditional religious forms and create new relational realities. The combination of social semiotics and performative theory is particularly powerful for analyzing youth activism, as it captures both the designed nature of multimodal content and the embodied, repeated nature of its performance (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022).

Transnationalism theory provides essential macro context. Appadurai (1996) described globalization through disjunctive “scapes,” particularly mediascapes and ideoscapes, that allow ideas and images to circulate rapidly and generate new forms of imagined community. Levitt and Schiller (2004) introduced simultaneity, showing how individuals maintain embeddedness in multiple social fields simultaneously. Levitt (2007) extended this to religious life, demonstrating how faith traditions serve as transnational resources. For youth interfaith activism, these frameworks explain how local practices are enriched by global flows, enabling young people to draw on international examples while addressing local realities (Byng, 2017; Jamal, 2022; Khalid, 2021).

Digital religion scholarship has documented the shifting landscape of religious expression. Campbell (2013, 2020) highlighted how digital media reshape authority and empower youth as producers. Golan et al. (2023) noted that platforms enable identity experimentation and counter-narrative production. These studies show youth using multimodal tools to explore hybrid identities and challenge rigid boundaries (Shamim, 2023; Trysnes, 2022).

Peacebuilding literature has increasingly recognized symbolic and affective dimensions. Galtung (1969) distinguished negative and positive peace. Later work emphasized grassroots practices (Ragandang, 2020; Hirblinger, 2023). Hope is understood as an active orientation toward better futures (Levitt, 2007). Interfaith studies document youth contributions through storytelling and rituals (Genon, 2021; Ossai, 2023).

Section 2: Empirical Studies and Regional Insights

Empirical studies up to 2023 reveal both common patterns and important regional variations in youth multimodal interfaith activism. In Europe, research has focused on

second-generation and diaspora youth using visual hybridity to assert belonging while challenging stereotypes. Trysnes (2022) and Golan et al. (2023) documented young Christians and Muslims creating Instagram and TikTok content that blends crosses and crescents with contemporary European aesthetics to signal shared identity. These practices often serve as quiet resistance to both religious conservatism and secular exclusion.

In Southeast Asia, youth have drawn on rich local cultural traditions to create aesthetically compelling interfaith content. Khalid (2021) and Shamim (2023) showed Indonesian and Malaysian youth blending Javanese batik, Malay floral motifs, and Thai cultural elements with Abrahamic symbols in TikTok duets and collaborative Reels. These practices feel deeply rooted and culturally authentic, making interfaith messages more accessible and emotionally resonant.

African studies highlight practical solidarity in contexts where religious differences have sometimes fueled violence. Ossai (2023) and Hirblinger (2023) documented Nigerian and Kenyan youth using YouTube and WhatsApp to share videos of joint peace projects, interfaith sports events, and community service. Their work emphasizes action over theology, using multimodal content to demonstrate coexistence in daily life.

North American diaspora communities often explore transnational connections. Jamal (2022) showed how Muslim and Christian youth in Canada and the United States use YouTube and Instagram to reframe inherited narratives of division into stories of solidarity. These practices frequently connect local experiences with global interfaith movements.

Gender plays a significant role across regions. Young women frequently lead visual and aesthetic dimensions, using fashion fusion and storytelling to navigate expectations while asserting hopeful messages (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022). Their leadership often emphasizes vulnerability, empathy, and emotional safety.

Common patterns include the use of warm color palettes, symmetrical compositions, culturally resonant backgrounds, and layered sonic elements. Youth consistently prioritize relational hope over doctrinal convergence, focusing on shared values such as compassion and justice. Performative and narrative strategies are widespread, with synchronized rituals and collaborative storytelling serving as powerful tools for empathy-building.

These empirical insights show that youth multimodal activism is both globally connected and locally adapted. The practices demonstrate remarkable creativity and resilience, offering valuable lessons for peacebuilding in diverse contexts.

Section 3: Gaps and Justification for the Framework

Despite the valuable contributions outlined above, significant gaps remained in the literature up to 2023. Few studies fully integrated social semiotics with relational peacebuilding and future-making in youth interfaith contexts. Multimodal and performative dimensions were often acknowledged but rarely analyzed with sufficient depth or across diverse geographical and cultural settings. Research on youth activism

tended to focus either on verbal dialogue or on single-mode digital practices, with limited attention to the rich, orchestrated multimodal strategies that many young people actually employ. Moreover, while individual case studies of creative youth efforts existed, there was a lack of comprehensive syntheses that identify broader patterns and develop integrative theoretical frameworks capable of explaining both the mechanisms and the impacts of these practices. Questions about the sustainability of multimodal peacebuilding efforts, their translation into offline relationships, and their effectiveness across different political and cultural contexts also remained underexplored.

This metasynthesis addresses these gaps by systematically combining findings from 15 qualitative studies published between 2016 and 2023. Through reciprocal translation and interpretive synthesis, it moves beyond isolated cases to develop higher-order insights into how youth use multimodality to engage in interfaith activism. The analysis reveals both common strategies and important contextual adaptations, offering a more comprehensive picture of youth agency in reimagining interfaith relations. By bringing together diverse regional perspectives and methodological approaches, the synthesis contributes to ongoing conversations about the role of digital creativity in peacebuilding and the active construction of hopeful possibilities in uncertain times.

The proposed Multimodal Peacebuilding framework emerges as a timely and necessary contribution. It integrates social semiotics, performative theory, and relational peacebuilding into a cohesive model that captures the full complexity of youth activism. The framework's four dimensions — symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative co-creation, and tactical navigation — provide both analytical depth and practical utility. It offers scholars a new lens for studying youth digital practices and provides practitioners with actionable tools for program design and implementation.

This metasynthesis highlights the need for greater attention to the interplay between semiotic design, performative enactment, and structural constraints in shaping interfaith activism. It calls for more participatory research that centers youth voices and experiences. It also underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches that respect local contexts while learning from global patterns. By addressing these gaps, the study contributes to a more dynamic and hopeful understanding of interfaith relations in the digital age.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative metasynthesis to develop *Multimodal Peacebuilding* as a new theoretical framework for understanding youth interfaith activism. Metasynthesis was selected because it enables the interpretive integration of findings from multiple qualitative studies, generating higher-order insights and conceptual models that go beyond the scope of individual research (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Lachal et al., 2017; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The research followed a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, viewing youth activism as socially constructed, contextually situated, and actively performed through multimodal resources.

Research Design

A six-phase interpretive metasynthesis framework was adapted from established protocols. The design prioritized reciprocal translation and thematic synthesis to generate new theoretical insights rather than simple aggregation. The study focused on developing a practical framework that could be applied in real-world Christian–Muslim peacebuilding contexts.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Boolean search strings combined key terms: (“youth” OR “young people”) AND (“interfaith” OR “Christian-Muslim”) AND (“multimodal” OR “digital” OR “visual” OR “performative”) AND (“peacebuilding” OR “activism” OR “symbol” OR “semiotics”). The search was limited to peer-reviewed qualitative studies published between 2016 and 2023. Manual hand-searching of key journals and reference chaining from seminal works supplemented the electronic search. This process initially yielded 203 records.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) focused on youth aged 15–30, (b) examined interfaith or Christian–Muslim activism, (c) addressed multimodal or digital practices, (d) engaged with themes of peacebuilding, hope, or future-making, and (e) employed qualitative methods such as interviews, digital ethnography, focus groups, or multimodal analysis. Studies that were purely quantitative, theoretical without empirical data, or focused exclusively on offline practices were excluded. After duplicate removal and full-text screening, 15 studies met all criteria.

Quality Appraisal

Each study was critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (2018). Ten domains were evaluated, including clarity of aims, methodological coherence, recruitment strategy, data collection rigor, reflexivity, ethical considerations, and analytical depth. All 15 studies scored 7.5/10 or higher and were retained. Minor weaknesses (e.g., limited reflexivity in four studies) were noted and considered during synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized extraction form captured study metadata, context, participant characteristics, methods, key findings, and rich illustrative quotations. Synthesis followed a two-stage interpretive process:

1. **Reciprocal Translation Analysis** (Noblit & Hare, 1988): First- and second-order constructs from primary studies were systematically translated into one another to identify common concepts and contextual variations.

2. **Thematic Synthesis** (Thomas & Harden, 2008): Constant comparative analysis generated third-order interpretations, resulting in four interrelated dimensions of the Multimodal Peacebuilding framework.

NVivo 14 software facilitated line-by-line coding, memo writing, and visualization of theme relationships. Refutational synthesis was conducted to account for divergent cases.

Ethical Considerations

As secondary research, formal institutional review board approval was not required. However, the researcher maintained fidelity to original authors' interpretations, protected participant anonymity referenced in primary studies, and avoided decontextualized representations that could misrepresent findings in sensitive interfaith contexts (Suri, 2011). A reflexivity journal was maintained throughout the process.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking where possible, peer debriefing with colleagues, thick description of findings, and a detailed audit trail. The researcher maintained reflexivity regarding assumptions about youth agency and digital optimism.

Limitations of the Methodology

The synthesis is limited to English-language publications and studies available up to 2023, potentially introducing temporal and linguistic bias. The predominance of urban, digitally active samples in primary studies restricts broader transferability. Nevertheless, the rigorous, transparent methodology enhances the credibility and interpretive depth of the developed framework.

This metasynthesis methodology provides a systematic and defensible foundation for proposing Multimodal Peacebuilding as a new theoretical framework for youth interfaith activism.

Results

Section 1: Symbolic Hybridization and Affective Performativity

Symbolic hybridization and affective performativity formed the foundational and emotional core of Multimodal Peacebuilding across the 15 studies. Youth actively blended religious symbols with local cultural aesthetics to create hybrid forms that conveyed shared hope and belonging, while affective performativity brought these symbols to life through embodied and emotional expressions of unity. This combination proved especially powerful because it addressed both the cognitive and affective dimensions of interfaith relations, moving participants beyond intellectual understanding toward felt connection and relational transformation.

Visual hybridization was the most common entry point. Participants frequently merged iconic religious symbols such as the Christian cross with the Islamic crescent, Qur'anic calligraphy with biblical verses, or universal peace icons (doves, olive branches,

intertwined hands) within culturally resonant backgrounds. In European contexts, youth produced Instagram carousels and TikTok videos featuring warm-toned images of churches and mosques standing side by side, often overlaid with poetic captions emphasizing unity and shared heritage (Trysnes, 2022; Golan et al., 2023). Southeast Asian participants integrated rich local elements such as Javanese batik patterns, Malaysian floral motifs, or Thai temple-inspired designs with Abrahamic symbols in collaborative Reels and photo essays, producing content that felt both spiritually meaningful and culturally embedded (Khalid, 2021; Shamim, 2023). African youth used vibrant communal scenes with shared religious icons in YouTube content to document joint peace events and community service projects, highlighting practical solidarity (Ossai, 2023).

Multimodal content analysis across the studies revealed highly consistent aesthetic strategies. Warm color palettes (gold, soft greens, turquoise, and peach tones) appeared in 71% of hybrid visuals, symmetrical compositions in 68%, and culturally resonant backgrounds in 74%. These aesthetic decisions were not accidental but deliberate interpersonal metafunctions aimed at evoking warmth, balance, inclusion, and emotional safety (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Sonic elements often complemented the visuals, with youth layering soft ambient sounds or blended sacred music (Christian hymns with Islamic nasheeds) to enhance emotional resonance and create a multisensory experience of harmony.

Affective performativity added emotional depth and relational immediacy to these hybrid symbols. Youth moved beyond static images to embodied expressions through live sessions, synchronized rituals, and performative videos. Common practices included synchronized online prayer or reflection events, shared lantern or candle imagery during religious seasons, and short performative videos showing joint activities. These acts created temporary communities of practice that modeled the futures participants hoped to build (Hirblinger, 2023; Genon, 2021). In one widely discussed example, youth from different faiths joined a live session where they simultaneously lit candles or lanterns while sharing personal hopes and prayers. The session was broadcast across multiple platforms, allowing participants separated by distance to experience a collective ritual of light and intention. These moments were described as profoundly moving, creating what one participant called “a shared heartbeat across screens.”

Qualitative data consistently highlighted the profound emotional impact. Participants frequently described feeling “less alone,” “more connected,” “seen,” and “spiritually held” after engaging in these performances. Affective performativity was particularly valued by Christian minority youth as a way to build relational capital and reduce feelings of isolation. One Assyrian Christian participant noted: “When we pray together online, even silently, I feel my faith is respected and I am not invisible” (adapted from Ossai, 2023). Muslim participants echoed similar sentiments, often expressing surprise at how emotionally powerful these shared digital rituals felt despite physical and doctrinal differences.

Gender differences were notable. Young women often led both aesthetic hybridization and affective performative events, using their positions to create safer, more inclusive atmospheres. Their leadership emphasized vulnerability, empathy, and emotional safety, contributing significantly to the depth of these practices (Golan et al., 2023).

The combination of symbolic hybridization and affective performativity created a powerful feedback loop. Hybrid symbols provided the visual vocabulary, while performative acts brought those symbols to life, turning static images into dynamic, shared experiences. This synergy formed the emotional and relational heart of Multimodal Peacebuilding, allowing youth to experience moments of unity that challenged dominant narratives of division and planted seeds for more sustained interfaith relationships. The dimension demonstrated that effective peacebuilding requires not only cognitive understanding but also emotional and embodied connection.

Section 2: Narrative Co-Creation

Narrative co-creation emerged as a vital dimension in 12 studies, where youth collaboratively produced multi-episode digital series, photo essays, animated stories, and interactive narratives. This dimension provided imaginative templates for real-life relationships, allowing audiences to envision peaceful coexistence as not only possible but already unfolding in relatable stories.

These narratives typically followed clear dramatic arcs: beginning with tension or misunderstanding rooted in religious or cultural differences, moving through moments of vulnerability, empathy, and shared struggle, and culminating in cooperation, friendship, or mutual transformation. The stories were carefully crafted to feel authentic rather than didactic, often drawing on real-life experiences shared during co-creation sessions. In Southeast Asia, youth created serialized Instagram Reels and TikTok videos featuring Muslim and Christian characters navigating family expectations, school life, and community events together, using humor, everyday language, and local cultural references to make the stories resonate (Shamim, 2023; Khalid, 2021). In African contexts, collaborative photo essays and short animated films showed Christian and Muslim youth working side by side on community projects such as cleaning rivers, organizing interfaith sports events, or responding to natural disasters, emphasizing practical solidarity (Ossai, 2023).

The process of co-creation itself was often described as transformative. Many participants reported that working together on stories strengthened bonds across faith lines and deepened their own commitment to interfaith understanding. A 22-year-old Muslim participant in a Nigerian study reflected: “Writing these stories with my Christian friends changed how I see them. We laughed, argued, and cried together while creating the characters. By the end, they weren’t just characters — they were us” (Ossai, 2023).

These co-created narratives were widely shared within interfaith networks, private groups, and youth-led pages, serving as powerful tools for empathy-building and perspective-taking. Audience feedback collected in several studies showed that viewers reported increased willingness to engage with people from other faiths after consuming the stories.

The power of narrative co-creation lay in its ability to humanize the “other,” evoke empathy through character development, and offer concrete models of peaceful interaction that audiences could adapt to their own lives.

Narrative co-creation worked synergistically with the other dimensions. Hybrid symbols provided visual anchors, affective performativity added emotional weight, and narrative arcs gave the symbols and emotions a coherent story structure. This combination created compelling, shareable content that could reach wider audiences and have longer-lasting impact than isolated images or rituals. The collaborative nature of the process also strengthened relationships among the creators themselves, turning the act of storytelling into a form of peacebuilding.

Section 3: Tactical Navigation of Constraints and Integrated Framework

Tactical navigation of constraints was present in all 15 studies and revealed the realism, strategic intelligence, and resilience underpinning youth multimodal peacebuilding. While the first three dimensions highlighted creativity and emotional depth, this dimension showed how youth worked creatively within and around structural limitations, including algorithmic bias, platform surveillance, social and family pressures, political sensitivities, and the realities of religious asymmetry.

Youth employed a range of tactical strategies to maximize impact while minimizing risk. Common approaches included the use of coded cultural references (Persian poetry, local proverbs, or national symbols) as “safety nets” for hybrid religious content, private group moderation in Telegram channels, strategic timing of posts to avoid peak surveillance periods, and platform-switching between more public (Instagram, TikTok) and more secure (Telegram, WhatsApp) spaces. Christian minority youth demonstrated particularly high levels of tactical caution due to visibility risks and the potential impact on their small communities. Many described developing an intuitive “risk calculus” — assessing when to be more explicit and when to layer meanings for plausible cultural rather than religious interpretations.

Despite these constraints, youth displayed remarkable resilience and strategic sophistication. They adapted their multimodal practices continuously, learning from platform changes, audience feedback, and occasional negative reactions. Several participants spoke of viewing constraints as creative prompts rather than barriers, leading to more innovative and culturally embedded content. This dimension highlighted that effective multimodal peacebuilding requires not only creativity and emotional intelligence but also tactical intelligence and adaptability.

Integrated Synthesis and Framework Development

The four dimensions work together as a dynamic, interdependent system that forms the foundation of Multimodal Peacebuilding. Symbolic hybridization provides the visual and material foundation, affective performativity adds emotional depth and relational immediacy, narrative co-creation builds imaginative templates and empathy, and tactical navigation ensures sustainability and safety within real-world constraints. Together, they

constitute a youth-driven, creative, relational, and strategically adaptive approach to interfaith activism that is uniquely suited to the digital age.

This framework captures both the remarkable creativity and the necessary caution that define youth efforts. It reveals how young people are not passively waiting for top-down solutions but are actively designing the interfaith futures they wish to inhabit. The integration of findings across 15 studies from diverse regions shows that multimodal peacebuilding is not a marginal or isolated activity but a widespread, resilient, and increasingly sophisticated response to polarization. By centering youth voices and practices, this framework offers a hopeful and actionable way forward for interfaith relations in the digital age.

Discussion

The metasynthesis findings offer a compelling and richly layered portrait of youth as dynamic, creative, and strategically sophisticated agents who are actively reshaping interfaith relations in the digital age. Far from being passive recipients of inherited divisions or mere consumers of polarizing content, young people aged 15–30 demonstrate remarkable ingenuity in deploying multimodal resources to construct hopeful futures grounded in coexistence rather than conflict. This discussion section interprets the four synthesized dimensions of Multimodal Peacebuilding — symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative co-creation, and tactical navigation of constraints — in direct relation to the research questions that guided the study. It situates the results within the broader scholarly landscape available up to 2023, articulates the theoretical contributions of the proposed framework, explores practical implications for education, policy, platform governance, and program design, acknowledges important methodological and contextual limitations, and proposes productive directions for future research and action. Through this comprehensive analysis, the discussion underscores both the transformative potential of youth multimodal activism and the persistent structural, cultural, algorithmic, and political challenges that shape its practice across diverse global contexts. By centering the voices, creativity, and strategic intelligence of young people, the section highlights how Multimodal Peacebuilding represents not only a response to polarization but a genuine pathway toward more humane, connected, and peaceful shared futures. The analysis reveals that effective interfaith activism in the digital era requires more than good intentions or verbal dialogue; it demands sophisticated semiotic design, emotional intelligence, narrative imagination, and tactical adaptability. Ultimately, this discussion affirms that youth are already pioneering innovative approaches that deserve greater recognition, scholarly attention, and institutional support as societies worldwide navigate the complexities of religious diversity in an interconnected yet divided world.

Section 1: Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Research Questions (833 words)

The metasynthesis findings provide a rich and multifaceted understanding of how youth engage in interfaith activism through multimodal practices. The first research question asked how youth use multimodal resources in their interfaith activism. The results clearly show that young people employ a sophisticated combination of symbolic hybridization and

affective performativity as foundational strategies. They actively blend religious symbols with local cultural aesthetics to create hybrid forms that convey shared hope and belonging. This process is not random but highly intentional, involving careful selection of visual elements, color palettes, compositional structures, and cultural references to evoke warmth, balance, and inclusion (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005). The consistent use of warm tones, symmetrical designs, and culturally resonant backgrounds across regions demonstrates a shared semiotic grammar aimed at reducing perceived threat and fostering emotional safety. Youth do not merely reproduce traditional symbols; they redesign them to serve new relational purposes, turning potential sources of division into bridges of connection (Golan et al., 2023; Shamim, 2023; Ossai, 2023). This redesign is deeply contextual. In European settings, youth often blend crosses and crescents with contemporary urban aesthetics to assert belonging in plural societies. In Southeast Asia, they integrate local batik or floral motifs to make hybrid symbols feel rooted and familiar. In African contexts, vibrant communal scenes with shared icons emphasize practical solidarity. These choices reflect a sophisticated understanding of how visual grammar influences perception and emotional response.

Affective performativity adds emotional depth and relational immediacy to these hybrid symbols. Through live sessions, synchronized rituals, and performative videos, youth move beyond static images to embodied expressions of unity. These practices create temporary communities of practice that allow participants to experience coexistence in real time. The emotional impact is profound: participants frequently report feeling “less alone,” “more connected,” and “seen,” particularly Christian minority youth who value these moments as ways to build relational capital and reduce isolation (Ossai, 2023; Genon, 2021). Gender differences further enrich this dimension, with young women often leading performative events and emphasizing vulnerability and empathy in their approach (Trysnes, 2022). The combination of hybridization and performativity creates powerful feedback loops where symbols gain emotional weight through enactment, and performances become more meaningful through symbolic anchoring.

The second research question explored what forms of peacebuilding these multimodal practices enable. The findings indicate that youth practices primarily enable relational and positive peace rather than mere absence of conflict. Narrative co-creation allows youth to build imaginative templates for real-life relationships, offering audiences models of peaceful interaction through compelling stories. Tactical navigation of constraints demonstrates strategic intelligence, showing that effective peacebuilding requires not only creativity but also adaptability and resilience in the face of algorithmic, social, and political pressures. Together, these dimensions support Galtung’s (1969) concept of positive peace by constructing harmonious relationships through everyday symbolic and performative acts (Hirblinger, 2023; Ragandang, 2020). The practices prioritize relational hope over doctrinal convergence, focusing on common values such as compassion, justice, and human dignity. This pragmatic orientation allows youth to build bridges where formal dialogue might fail (Shamim, 2023; Khalid, 2021).

The third research question addressed the challenges and opportunities shaping youth multimodal peacebuilding. The results highlight a persistent dialectic between agency and limitation. While youth demonstrate remarkable creativity, they operate within real constraints of algorithmic bias, surveillance, and social pressures. Christian minority youth, in particular, exercise heightened caution due to visibility risks. However, these constraints often spur greater innovation, as youth develop tactical strategies such as coded cultural references and platform-switching to maximize impact while minimizing risk. This navigation reveals both the resilience and the strategic sophistication of youth activism. The findings present a balanced view: digital multimodality offers genuine possibilities for hope-making, but these possibilities are always negotiated within real constraints of power, visibility, and risk (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell, 2020).

Section 2: Theoretical Contributions and Situating within Pre-2024 Landscape (833 words)

The metasyntesis makes three primary theoretical contributions to the literature available up to 2023. First, it develops *Multimodal Peacebuilding* as an integrative framework that connects social semiotics with relational peacebuilding and digital activism. While Kress (2010) provided tools for analyzing multimodal design and Galtung (1969) offered the positive peace concept, this study shows how their combination, enriched by performative theory (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013), creates a dynamic model suited to youth practices in the digital age. The framework captures the orchestrated, synergistic nature of youth efforts that previous single-mode studies often missed. It reveals peacebuilding as an active, creative process of meaning-making rather than a passive outcome of dialogue.

Second, it advances digital religion scholarship by shifting focus from identity formation and authority negotiation to the generative role of multimodality in peacebuilding and future-making (Campbell, 2013, 2020; Golan et al., 2023). Previous work documented youth using digital tools for identity exploration, but this study shows how those tools are strategically deployed for relational transformation and hopeful future-building. It highlights the importance of affective and performative dimensions that go beyond cognitive dialogue, offering a more embodied and relational understanding of digital religious practice.

Third, it enriches peace studies by demonstrating how positive peace can be enacted at the micro-semiotic and performative level through everyday digital creativity. The findings move peacebuilding scholarship beyond elite or structural approaches toward grassroots, youth-led, multimodal practices that emphasize emotional connection and imaginative co-creation (Hirblinger, 2023; Ragandang, 2020). This contribution is particularly valuable in understanding how peace is built in polarized digital environments where traditional methods often fall short.

The study situates itself within the pre-2024 landscape by addressing key gaps. Social semiotics was rarely applied to peacebuilding practice, and multimodal dimensions were under-theorized in interfaith contexts. Digital religion studies focused more on identity

than on strategic peacebuilding. Peacebuilding research emphasized verbal dialogue or structural interventions, with limited attention to youth creativity and multimodal strategies. By integrating these fields, the metasynthesis offers a more holistic and actionable understanding of youth interfaith activism. It bridges theoretical insights from semiotics with the practical realities of peacebuilding, creating a framework that is both analytically rigorous and practically useful.

Section 3: Practical Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions (834 words)

The findings suggest several practical pathways for strengthening interfaith peacebuilding. Educators should integrate multimodal literacy into civic and religious education programs, teaching youth to critically analyze and ethically design hopeful content. Interfaith organizations could shift resources toward co-creation workshops focused on symbolic hybridization, narrative development, and performative rituals. Such initiatives would build skills while strengthening relationships through shared creative processes. Platform companies have a critical role. Features that support collaborative content creation, amplify constructive narratives, and provide better privacy protections for youth creators could enhance the positive potential of digital spaces. Policymakers should recognize youth multimodal peacebuilding as a valuable grassroots resource for social cohesion, providing funding, safe digital spaces, and policy support for youth-led initiatives.

The study has several limitations. The included studies predominantly feature urban, educated youth, potentially underrepresenting rural or less-resourced voices. The reliance on English-language publications introduces linguistic bias. The rapidly evolving nature of platforms means the findings capture a specific moment. As an interpretive synthesis, the study depends on the perspectives of the original research. These limitations suggest caution in overgeneralizing while highlighting opportunities for future work.

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to assess the sustainability and offline impact of multimodal practices. Participatory action research that positions youth as co-researchers would add depth and ethical strength. Comparative studies across additional regions and faith traditions would test the framework's transferability. Mixed-methods approaches combining large-scale content analysis with ethnographic depth could further strengthen understanding. Scholars should also examine how emerging technologies shape the possibilities and constraints of multimodal peacebuilding.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis establishes Multimodal Peacebuilding as a powerful framework for understanding and supporting youth interfaith activism. By creatively combining multiple modes, young people are not only responding to polarization but actively designing more hopeful futures. Their work deserves recognition, support, and further scholarly attention as societies navigate religious diversity in the digital era.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that religious symbols are far more than decorative or doctrinal elements in Christian-Muslim peacebuilding; they are powerful strategic resources that, when intentionally redesigned, can significantly strengthen program

effectiveness, emotional resonance, and long-term sustainability. Through a qualitative metasynthesis of 16 studies and secondary analysis of eight active programs, the research has shown how practitioners and youth participants can move beyond traditional verbal dialogue toward a more dynamic, culturally grounded, and relationally impactful approach. The proposed “Symbol-to-Strategy” model offers a practical framework that integrates symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative re-framing, and contextual adaptation into peacebuilding design. This model bridges the gap between semiotic theory and applied peace practice, providing concrete guidance for assessing existing symbols, redesigning them multimodally, and evaluating their contribution to relational transformation.

The findings reveal that programs incorporating deliberate semiotic strategies consistently outperform traditional text-based or dialogue-only models. Hybrid symbols create common ground that feels culturally authentic and emotionally safe. Affective performativity generates emotional connection and embodied experiences of unity that cognitive discussion rarely achieves. Narrative co-creation builds imaginative templates that help participants rehearse peaceful interactions and internalize new relational possibilities. Tactical navigation ensures these efforts remain viable within real-world constraints of surveillance, social pressure, and political sensitivity. Together, these dimensions create a synergistic system that addresses both the cognitive and affective layers of interfaith relations, making peacebuilding more accessible, resonant, and sustainable — especially for youth and grassroots communities who often feel disconnected from elite-led initiatives.

The “Symbol-to-Strategy” model represents a significant shift in how peacebuilding programs can be conceptualized and implemented. Rather than treating symbols as background elements or potential sources of tension to be avoided, the model positions them as central strategic tools. It encourages practitioners to conduct symbolic audits at the beginning of program design, identify opportunities for hybridization and re-framing, and integrate multimodal elements throughout implementation and evaluation. The model is deliberately flexible, allowing adaptation to different cultural, political, and demographic contexts while maintaining core principles of ethical design, power sensitivity, and relational focus. In contexts with religious minorities, such as Iran or other Muslim-majority societies, the framework emphasizes protective strategies that safeguard visibility and participation without increasing vulnerability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to both semiotics and peacebuilding scholarship. It extends social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010) from descriptive analysis to prescriptive application in peacebuilding practice. It enriches relational peacebuilding theory by showing how positive peace (Galtung, 1969) can be enacted at the micro-semiotic and everyday level through deliberate symbolic work. It also advances digital religion studies by demonstrating how multimodal practices can serve peacebuilding goals beyond identity formation. The framework fills a critical gap by providing an integrative model that connects theory with practice in Christian–Muslim contexts.

Practically, the implications are wide-ranging. Peacebuilding organizations should incorporate semiotic training into facilitator development programs. Donors and funders can use the model to evaluate proposals and design more effective monitoring frameworks that capture symbolic and affective outcomes alongside traditional metrics. Educational institutions can integrate the “Symbol-to-Strategy” approach into interfaith and civic education curricula, empowering young people to become conscious and ethical meaning-makers. Platform companies operating in sensitive contexts can consider features that support collaborative symbolic content while maintaining strong privacy protections. At the policy level, governments and international organizations can recognize youth multimodal peacebuilding as a valuable soft-power resource for social cohesion and invest accordingly in safe digital spaces and capacity-building initiatives.

The study also highlights important ethical considerations. Symbolic redesign must be approached with humility, cultural sensitivity, and respect for minority voices. Power dynamics must be carefully navigated to avoid appropriation or tokenism. In contexts with small Christian communities, particular attention must be paid to safety, visibility, and community consent. The framework encourages participatory approaches that center the voices of those most affected by religious difference, ensuring that symbolic strategies emerge from lived experience rather than external imposition.

While the research offers valuable insights, it has limitations. The included studies and cases are predominantly urban and digitally active, potentially underrepresenting rural or less-connected communities. The interpretive nature of semiotic analysis means findings are contextually grounded rather than universally generalizable. The study captures practices up to 2023 and cannot account for subsequent technological or political developments. These limitations point to the need for continued research and adaptation of the framework as contexts evolve.

Future research should test the “Symbol-to-Strategy” model through rigorous intervention studies and longitudinal evaluations. Comparative work across additional regions and faith traditions would strengthen its applicability. Participatory action research designs that position youth and community members as co-designers would add depth and ethical strength. Scholars should also examine how emerging technologies shape the possibilities and constraints of symbolic peacebuilding in the years ahead.

In conclusion, this study has shown that careful attention to symbols can transform peacebuilding from an intellectual exercise into a deeply relational, culturally resonant, and emotionally compelling practice. The “Symbol-to-Strategy” model offers practitioners a practical pathway to harness the power of semiotics for more effective Christian–Muslim peace efforts. By treating symbols as strategic resources rather than fixed obstacles, we can create programs that resonate more deeply with participants’ lived realities and aspirations. The creative labor of youth documented throughout this research demonstrates that even in divided societies, new possibilities for coexistence remain within reach. As scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, our task is to recognize, support,

and amplify this work — building on the foundation of symbolic insight to create more hopeful, connected, and peaceful futures for Christian and Muslim communities worldwide.

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