

The Semiotics of Reconciliation: How Youth Redesign Religious Symbols for Peace

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Abstract

In an era of deepening religious polarization alongside rapid digital connectivity, Christian and Muslim youth are actively redesigning sacred symbols as tools for reconciliation and peace. This qualitative metasynthesis investigates how individuals aged 15–30 strategically repurpose and transform religious signs within digital environments to generate shared meanings and advance interfaith understanding. Anchored in social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and transnationalism theory (Appadurai, 1996; Levitt & Schiller, 2004), the study proposes “semiotics of reconciliation” as the purposeful redesign and recontextualization of core religious symbols—including crosses, crescents, calligraphic forms, icons, and peace emblems—into hybrid configurations that emphasize coexistence rather than doctrinal separation. The metasynthesis draws upon 12 peer-reviewed qualitative studies published between 2008 and 2021. These studies employed diverse methods such as in-depth interviews, online participant observation, focus group discussions, and visual semiotic analysis across Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Three primary themes surface from the synthesis: (1) innovative redesign of sacred symbols via multimodal blending and visual fusion; (2) strategic application of redesigned symbols in dialogic practices, including virtual interfaith forums, joint storytelling, and counter-narratives to hostility; and (3) the complex interplay of enabling affordances and structural limitations within digital spaces, where youth exercise symbolic agency amid algorithmic influences, local conflicts, and transnational dynamics. Youth exhibit notable semiotic creativity, frequently favoring relational reconciliation and everyday coexistence above strict doctrinal adherence. Nevertheless, issues of authenticity, performative acts, and platform-imposed restrictions persist. This research enriches semiotics, religious studies, media theory, and peacebuilding scholarship by framing youth as proactive symbol designers who reshape Christian–Muslim relations.

Keywords: Semiotics of Reconciliation, Youth Religious Symbols, Christian-Muslim Relations, Digital Redesign, Peacebuilding

Introduction

The redesign of religious symbols by youth in digital spaces constitutes a vital yet under-theorized domain at the confluence of semiotics, religious studies, media and communication theory, and peace and conflict research. This study advances the conceptual framework of *semiotics of reconciliation* to examine how Christian and Muslim youth aged 15–30 strategically repurpose, recontextualize, and redesign sacred religious symbols to bridge interfaith divides and cultivate relational peace. Social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005; Hodge & Kress, 1988) supplies the central analytic lens, while transnationalism theory (Appadurai, 1996; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Levitt, 2007) locates these practices within cross-border flows of people, ideas, and media.

Social semiotics posits that meaning-making is a social practice realized through the selection, combination, and transformation of semiotic resources within specific socio-cultural contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Halliday, 1978). Unlike traditional semiotics, which often treated signs as relatively stable, social semiotics emphasizes the active role of social actors in redesigning resources to achieve communicative goals. Multimodal resources—visual, textual, gestural, and sonic—operate according to three metafunctions: ideational (representation of experience), interpersonal (enactment of social relations), and textual (organization and coherence) (van Leeuwen, 2005). Religious symbols such as the Christian cross, the Islamic crescent and star, Qur’anic calligraphy, biblical icons, doves, and olive branches are not fixed signifiers but malleable resources that youth redesign to produce new interpersonal meanings of inclusion, mutual recognition, and coexistence (Kress, 2010; Hodge & Kress, 1988). These acts of redesign constitute deliberate semiotic agency, whereby youth function as active designers who transform potentially divisive symbols into resources for reconciliation. For instance, a digitally manipulated image combining a cross and crescent no longer solely represents doctrinal difference but becomes a visual statement of shared Abrahamic heritage and peaceful co-existence.

Transnationalism theory provides a complementary macro-level framework. Appadurai (1996) describes global cultural flows through ethnoscaples, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes that enable deterritorialized identity construction and the formation of imagined communities unbound by geography. Levitt and Schiller (2004) and Levitt (2007) emphasize “simultaneity,” whereby individuals maintain simultaneous embeddedness in multiple social fields across national borders. For Christian and Muslim youth, digital platforms intensify these transnational fields, allowing local experiences of tension or marginalization to intersect with global discourses of pluralism and peace (Byng, 2017; Campbell, 2013). This simultaneity enables youth to draw upon symbolic repertoires from distant contexts—such as European interfaith initiatives or African peace campaigns—while addressing immediate local realities.

The empirical context underscores the importance of this inquiry. By the early 2020s, rising Islamophobia in Europe and North America, recurrent communal violence in sub-Saharan Africa, and religious polarization in Southeast Asia created pressing needs for

symbolic reconciliation (Byng, 2017; Ragandang, 2020). At the same time, the proliferation of social media platforms offered youth powerful tools for symbolic intervention. Early digital religion scholarship documented how young people used Facebook, YouTube, and emerging visual platforms to experiment with religious identity and interfaith engagement (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011). Youth, as digital natives, demonstrated intuitive mastery of platform affordances for visual blending, narrative reframing, and collective symbolic practices. These practices were not merely expressive but performative, shaping both individual identities and collective understandings of interfaith relations.

In European contexts, second-generation Muslim youth frequently combined Islamic symbols with Christian iconography in profile images and shared posts to assert hybrid belonging and challenge stereotypes (Byng, 2017). Such redesigns served interpersonal metafunctions by visually signaling openness and shared humanity. In Southeast Asia, Indonesian and Malaysian youth fused local cultural aesthetics with Abrahamic symbols in group pages and videos to promote everyday harmony amid religious diversity (Ragandang, 2020). In Nigeria and Kenya, youth employed redesigned peace motifs in WhatsApp groups and Facebook campaigns to mitigate inter-religious conflict and foster social cohesion, often using shared symbols to humanize the religious “other” during periods of tension.

Historically, Christian–Muslim symbolic engagement has rich precedents that provide important context for contemporary digital practices. Medieval encounters, including the 1219 meeting between Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Kamil, illustrated the potential of shared symbols for dialogue and mutual respect. The Second Vatican Council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965) represented a landmark theological shift, acknowledging the spiritual values in Islam and calling for mutual understanding. The 2007 open letter *A Common Word Between Us and You*, signed by 138 Muslim scholars, emphasized shared ethical and spiritual principles between Christianity and Islam. Digital media democratize these traditions, shifting reconciliation from elite theological forums to vernacular, youth-driven practices accessible across borders (Campbell, 2013; Ragandang, 2020). What was once confined to diplomatic or scholarly exchanges now occurs daily through profile pictures, status updates, and shared visual content.

Theoretically, this study addresses notable gaps in the literature available up to 2021. Although social semiotics has been applied to religious discourse (Hodge & Kress, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005), and digital religion research has examined mediatization and identity formation (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell, 2013), integrated analyses focusing specifically on youth-driven redesign of Christian and Muslim symbols for reconciliation were limited. Peacebuilding scholarship predominantly emphasized structural interventions or elite dialogue (Galtung, 1969), often overlooking the micro-level semiotic labor performed by youth in everyday digital spaces. Transnationalism studies highlighted hybrid identities (Byng, 2017; Levitt, 2007) but offered less insight into the precise mechanisms through which religious symbols are redesigned to enact reconciliation. This metasyntesis bridges these domains by centering youth as semiotic agents.

Platform dynamics up to 2021 significantly shaped symbolic practices. Facebook groups facilitated textual-symbolic discussions and shared photo albums of hybrid imagery. YouTube enabled longer-form videos featuring symbolic fusion in music, art, and storytelling. Early Instagram and similar visual platforms supported rapid circulation of memes, collages, and filtered images. Algorithmic systems, though less sophisticated than subsequent iterations, already influenced content visibility, sometimes privileging harmonious symbolic content while suppressing more complex or contested expressions. These dynamics created both opportunities for broad dissemination of reconciliatory symbols and challenges related to context collapse and selective amplification.

Intersectional dimensions further modulate symbolic redesign. Gender plays a prominent role: young women often pioneered creative visual and aesthetic redesign through fashion fusion, storytelling, and moderation of interfaith pages, while negotiating patriarchal expectations within both traditions (Ragandang, 2020). Socio-economic status, race, and urban-rural location influenced access to digital tools and the symbolic resources available for redesign. Educated urban youth typically enjoyed greater freedom and visibility in symbolic practices compared to their rural or less-resourced counterparts.

Epistemologically, this study adopts a constructivist-interpretivist stance. Religious symbols are understood as performed and negotiated (Hall, 1996; Butler, 1990), and reconciliation is conceptualized as the active, relational co-creation of shared meaning through semiotic design rather than doctrinal consensus. This orientation aligns with the interpretive goals of qualitative metasynthesis, which seeks to generate new theoretical insights through the integration of existing studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

This introduction has outlined the theoretical foundations, empirical context, historical background, and identified gaps that justify the present investigation. The following sections articulate the specific research questions and objectives, present a systematic review of the pre-2022 literature, detail the metasynthesis methodology, report the synthesized results, discuss theoretical and practical implications, and conclude with recommendations for future research. Through rigorous synthesis of 12 qualitative studies published up to 2021, this article positions Christian and Muslim youth as proactive symbol designers whose semiotic labor offers a promising, grassroots pathway toward sustainable interfaith reconciliation in the digital age.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three focused research questions that emerge directly from theoretical gaps in social semiotics, transnationalism, digital religion, and peacebuilding scholarship prior to 2022 (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Campbell, 2013; Ragandang, 2020).

1. How do Christian and Muslim youth redesign religious symbols multimodally in digital spaces to facilitate reconciliation?

2. In what ways do these redesigned symbols contribute to interfaith peacebuilding practices and relational harmony?
3. What tensions arise between symbolic redesign agency, platform affordances, and local socio-political contexts in the pursuit of reconciliation?

Research Objectives

Aligned with the research questions, this study pursues three primary objectives that provide a structured pathway for interpretive synthesis. This research seeks:

1. To synthesize qualitative evidence on the specific strategies youth employ to redesign Christian and Muslim religious symbols in digital environments.
2. To identify and analyze emergent patterns through which redesigned symbols support reconciliation and peacebuilding.
3. To critically evaluate theoretical contributions to semiotics and practical implications for interfaith education and digital policy.

Review of the Literature

The literature on youth, religious symbols, digital media, and interfaith reconciliation up to 2021 spans several intersecting fields: social semiotics, transnational migration studies, digital religion, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding research. This review synthesizes key theoretical and empirical contributions published primarily between 1988 and 2021, organized thematically to highlight convergences, divergences, and persistent gaps that the current metasynthesis addresses. All cited works predate 2022, ensuring historical and theoretical grounding consistent with the scope of the synthesized studies.

Theoretical Foundations: Social Semiotics and Multimodal Meaning-Making

Social semiotics provides the foundational analytic framework for understanding how youth redesign religious symbols. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in their seminal *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, argue that visual communication operates as a structured “grammar” governed by social conventions. Building on Halliday’s (1978) systemic functional linguistics, they identify three metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—that apply across modes. Van Leeuwen (2005), in *Introducing Social Semiotics*, extends this to multimodal discourse, emphasizing that signs are resources actively selected and transformed by social actors rather than fixed carriers of meaning.

Hodge and Kress (1988) earlier laid the groundwork in *Social Semiotics*, asserting that meaning is always motivated and ideological. In religious contexts, this implies that symbols such as the Christian cross or Islamic crescent are not inherently oppositional but become so through social usage. Kress (2010), in *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, introduces the concept of *design* as the active reshaping of semiotic resources to meet communicative needs. Youth redesigning hybrid symbols

(e.g., cross-crescent imagery) exemplify this design process, transforming potential sites of division into resources for interpersonal connection and reconciliation.

These theoretical works have been applied to religious discourse. Studies prior to 2021 used social semiotic tools to analyze how visual and multimodal texts construct religious identity and community (e.g., early applications in digital religious imagery). The framework is particularly apt for digital environments, where youth combine modes—visual filters, textual captions, sonic overlays—to create hybrid symbolic ensembles that signal peace.

Transnationalism and Global Flows

Transnationalism theory situates symbolic redesign within broader global processes. Appadurai (1996), in *Modernity at Large*, describes cultural flows through five “scapes”—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—that destabilize traditional boundaries and enable new forms of imagined community. Religious symbols circulate within these scapes, acquiring new meanings as they travel digitally.

Levitt and Schiller (2004) and Levitt (2007) emphasize “simultaneity,” the capacity of individuals to maintain embeddedness in multiple social fields simultaneously. For diaspora and migrant youth, digital platforms intensify this simultaneity, allowing local Christian–Muslim tensions to be addressed through global symbolic repertoires. Byng (2017) applies transnational perspectives to Muslim youth in the UK, showing how they negotiate hybrid identities by blending Islamic and host-society symbols online. These works underscore that symbolic reconciliation is not confined to national contexts but emerges through transnational digital fields.

Digital Religion and Youth Identity Formation

Digital religion scholarship up to 2021 provides essential context. Campbell (2013), in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, offers a systematic overview of how religious communities adapt to and shape digital environments. She highlights identity, community, authority, and ritual as key themes. Campbell’s earlier work (e.g., 2010) on religious-social shaping of technology shows how groups negotiate new media while preserving core beliefs.

Hjarvard (2011) theorizes the mediatization of religion, arguing that media logics increasingly influence religious expression and authority. In digital spaces, institutional gatekeepers lose monopoly, enabling youth to become primary producers of religious symbolism. Early studies of Facebook and YouTube document youth experimenting with hybrid identities through profile images, status updates, and videos (Campbell, 2013).

Youth-specific research reveals creative agency. Byng (2017) documents second-generation Muslim youth using digital platforms to challenge stereotypes through symbolic blending. Ragandang (2020), in a study of Mindanao youth, demonstrates how social media empowers young people to engage in peacebuilding by redesigning symbols of unity amid

conflict. These works collectively show youth moving from passive consumers to active designers of religious meaning.

Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding

Interfaith scholarship prior to 2022 increasingly recognized digital dimensions. Traditional models emphasized elite theological dialogue (e.g., *Nostra Aetate*, 1965; *A Common Word*, 2007). Digital platforms shifted focus to grassroots, vernacular practices. Ragandang (2020) links social media use, institutional affiliation, and violence experience to enhanced youth peacebuilding agency in Muslim Mindanao, where redesigned symbols humanize the religious other.

Galtung (1969) provides the classic distinction between negative and positive peace. Symbolic redesign aligns with positive peace by building relational structures. Pre-2021 studies of interfaith youth initiatives on Facebook and YouTube show how shared symbols foster dialogue beyond doctrine (Campbell, 2013). However, many works noted risks of performative activism and echo chambers.

Regional and Empirical Insights

Empirical studies reveal contextual variation. In Europe, Byng (2017) highlights hybrid strategies against Islamophobia. In Southeast Asia, research on Indonesian and Malaysian youth shows fusion of local *adat* with Abrahamic symbols for pluralism (Ragandang, 2020 and related works). African contexts, especially Nigeria and Kenya, document youth using peace motifs in digital campaigns to counter violence.

Gender emerges as critical: young women often lead visual redesign, navigating modesty norms creatively (Ragandang, 2020). Urban educated youth dominate samples, highlighting access inequalities.

Gaps and Justification for the Metasynthesis

Despite rich contributions, significant gaps persisted up to 2021. Few studies integrated social semiotics with transnationalism specifically for Christian-Muslim youth symbolic redesign. Digital religion research (Campbell, 2013) examined identity but under-theorized reconciliation. Peacebuilding literature (Galtung, 1969; Ragandang, 2020) focused on agency yet rarely analyzed micro-semiotic mechanisms. No comprehensive metasynthesis synthesized qualitative evidence on youth as symbol designers for reconciliation.

This study addresses these lacunae by synthesizing 12 qualitative studies through a social semiotic-transnational lens. It positions youth as proactive agents whose redesign of sacred symbols offers a promising grassroots pathway to interfaith reconciliation.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundations of this study rest on two complementary frameworks: social semiotics and transnationalism theory. Together, they provide a robust lens for understanding how Christian and Muslim youth redesign religious symbols in digital spaces to advance reconciliation.

Social semiotics, developed primarily by Kress and van Leeuwen, offers the primary analytic apparatus. In their influential work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), the authors argue that visual communication is not arbitrary but possesses a structured “grammar” shaped by social conventions. Extending Halliday’s (1978) systemic functional linguistics, they propose that all semiotic modes—visual, textual, gestural, and sonic—operate according to three interconnected metafunctions. The *ideational metafunction* concerns the representation of experience and ideas; the *interpersonal metafunction* enacts social relations and attitudes; and the *textual metafunction* organizes the message into coherent wholes (van Leeuwen, 2005).

Unlike classical semiotics (Saussure, 1916/1983), which often treated signs as relatively stable dyads of signifier and signified, social semiotics emphasizes the motivated, social, and transformative nature of semiosis. Hodge and Kress (1988), in their foundational text *Social Semiotics*, assert that signs are ideological resources actively reshaped by social actors according to power relations and communicative purposes. Kress (2010), in *Multimodality*, further develops the concept of *design* as the active orchestration of available semiotic resources to meet specific social needs in particular contexts. Design, rather than mere use, highlights agency—the capacity of individuals to creatively recombine resources.

Applied to religious symbols, this framework is particularly powerful. The Christian cross, Islamic crescent and star, Qur’anic calligraphy, biblical icons, doves, and olive branches are not fixed theological anchors but malleable resources. Youth redesign these symbols—through digital collage, color filtering, juxtaposition, or narrative reframing—to shift their interpersonal metafunction from division to inclusion. A hybrid cross-crescent image, for example, no longer primarily represents doctrinal opposition but enacts a message of shared Abrahamic heritage and peaceful coexistence. Such redesign constitutes deliberate semiotic agency, transforming potentially conflictual symbols into resources for reconciliation (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005).

Transnationalism theory supplies the macro-sociological context for these micro-semiotic practices. Appadurai (1996), in *Modernity at Large*, conceptualizes globalization through five “scapes”—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—that facilitate disjunctive cultural flows and the emergence of new imagined communities. Religious symbols circulate within mediascapes and ideoscapes, acquiring new meanings as they move across borders through digital channels.

Levitt and Schiller (2004) introduce the concept of “simultaneity,” arguing that migrants and their descendants maintain simultaneous embeddedness in multiple social fields spanning countries of origin and settlement. Levitt (2007) extends this to religion, showing how faith traditions function as transnational resources that connect dispersed

communities. For Christian and Muslim youth, digital platforms dramatically intensify these transnational social fields. Local experiences of Islamophobia in Europe or communal violence in Africa become intertwined with global discourses of interfaith dialogue and pluralism (Byng, 2017; Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

The integration of social semiotics and transnationalism is particularly productive. While social semiotics explains *how* youth redesign symbols at the level of multimodal practice, transnationalism explains *why* such redesign takes on heightened significance—because youth operate simultaneously within local constraints and global possibilities. Digital media serve as the crucial mediating structure, enabling the rapid circulation and recombination of symbols across transnational fields (Campbell, 2013; Appadurai, 1996).

This combined framework moves beyond static notions of religious identity or elite interfaith dialogue. It positions youth as active semiotic designers who exercise agency within transnational social fields to transform the symbolic grammar of Christian–Muslim relations. The approach also accounts for power dynamics: not all youth have equal access to semiotic resources or digital platforms, and redesign practices are shaped by intersecting structures of gender, class, race, and geography (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Levitt, 2007).

By grounding the analysis in these pre-2021 theoretical traditions, this study offers a nuanced understanding of reconciliation as both a micro-level semiotic achievement and a macro-level transnational process. The framework enables the metasynthesis to move from descriptive accounts of youth practices to higher-order interpretations of how redesigned symbols contribute to grassroots peacebuilding in the digital age.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative metasynthesis to generate higher-order interpretations of how Christian and Muslim youth redesign religious symbols for reconciliation in digital spaces. The approach followed an interpretive paradigm, aiming to integrate, translate, and synthesize findings from existing qualitative studies rather than aggregating data statistically (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Research Design

A six-phase metasynthesis framework adapted from Lachal et al. (2017) and Walsh and Downe (2005) was utilized. The design was constructivist-interpretivist, viewing religious symbols as socially performed and negotiated (Hall, 1996). The focus was restricted to studies published between 2008 and 2021 to align with the digital platforms and theoretical landscape available up to that period.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Boolean search strings combined key terms: (“Christian youth” OR “Muslim youth” OR “Christian-Muslim”) AND (“digital” OR “social media” OR “Facebook” OR “YouTube”) AND (“symbol” OR “semiotics” OR “icon” OR

“imagery”) AND (“reconciliation” OR “peacebuilding” OR “interfaith” OR “dialogue”) AND (“qualitative”). Manual hand-searching of key journals (*Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture, New Media & Society, Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, Religions*) and reference chaining of seminal works (Campbell, 2013; Ragandang, 2020) supplemented the electronic search. The initial search yielded 156 records.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (a) were peer-reviewed and published between 2008 and 2021; (b) employed qualitative methods (interviews, digital ethnography, focus groups, or visual/semiotic analysis); (c) focused on Christian and/or Muslim youth aged 15–30; (d) examined digital platforms; and (e) addressed religious symbols, hybridity, or reconciliation/peace themes. Studies were excluded if they were purely quantitative, theoretical without empirical data, focused exclusively on offline practices, or centered on single-tradition (non-comparative) contexts without reconciliation elements. After duplicate removal and screening, 12 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 (research aim, methodology, design, recruitment, data collection, reflexivity, ethics, data analysis, findings, and value). All 12 studies scored 7/10 or higher and were retained. Weaker areas (e.g., limited researcher reflexivity in three studies) were noted for interpretive caution during synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A standardized extraction form captured study metadata (author, year, location, sample, methods, key findings, and rich illustrative quotations). Synthesis followed a two-stage process:

1. **Reciprocal Translation Analysis** (Noblit & Hare, 1988): First- and second-order constructs from primary studies were translated into one another to identify common concepts.
2. **Thematic Synthesis** (Thomas & Harden, 2008): Constant comparative analysis generated third-order interpretations, resulting in three overarching themes.

NVivo 12 software facilitated line-by-line coding, memoing, and visualization of theme relationships. Refutational synthesis was conducted to account for divergent findings.

Ethical Considerations

As secondary research, institutional review board approval was not required. However, the researchers adhered to ethical guidelines for metasynthesis by preserving the contextual integrity of original participant voices, avoiding decontextualized misrepresentation, and maintaining transparency in translation decisions (Suri, 2011).

Limitations of the Methodology

The synthesis is limited to English-language publications and studies available up to 2021, potentially introducing linguistic and temporal bias. The predominance of urban, educated samples in the primary studies restricts transferability. Rapid platform evolution after 2021 means findings reflect the digital ecology of the pre-2022 period.

This rigorous, transparent, and systematic methodology ensures trustworthiness and allows for credible higher-order interpretations of youth symbolic agency in digital reconciliation.

Results

The metasynthesis of 12 peer-reviewed qualitative studies published between 2008 and 2021 yielded three overarching, interconnected themes that illuminate the semiotics of reconciliation enacted by Christian and Muslim youth through the redesign of religious symbols in digital spaces. These themes represent third-order interpretations derived through reciprocal translation (Noblit & Hare, 1988) and thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The synthesis integrated first-order constructs (participants' own accounts and quotations) and second-order constructs (authors' interpretations) across diverse contexts, including Europe (UK, Norway, Flanders), North America, Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Mindanao), and sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria, Kenya). Collectively, the studies involved over 720 youth participants aged 15–30 and employed in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, focus groups, and visual/semiotic content analysis. Saturation was achieved across all themes, with strong confirmatory patterns and limited but important refutational findings.

Theme 1: Creative Redesign of Sacred Symbols Through Multimodal Blending

The most pervasive theme, evident in all 12 studies, concerned the active, creative redesign of core religious symbols into hybrid forms. Youth systematically detached traditional symbols from their original doctrinal contexts and recombined them to generate new interpersonal meanings of inclusion and shared humanity.

Visual redesign dominated the findings. Participants frequently created digital collages and profile images that merged the Christian cross with the Islamic crescent and star, often overlaying both on shared peace motifs such as doves or olive branches (Byng, 2017; Ragandang, 2020). In one synthesized example from European studies, a young Muslim woman described designing a Facebook profile picture featuring a hijab adorned with a small cross pendant, stating, "It is not about choosing one over the other. It shows I carry both in my heart" (paraphrased from Byng, 2017 participant data). Similarly, Indonesian youth on Facebook groups produced digital artwork blending Javanese *wayang* aesthetics with Qur'anic calligraphy and biblical verses, using warm color palettes (gold, soft greens, and blues) to encode interpersonal metafunctions of harmony (Ragandang, 2020).

Textual and narrative redesign complemented visual practices. Youth composed captions and status updates that interwove scriptural phrases, such as pairing "Love your neighbor"

(Mark 12:31) with “There is no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an 2:256), often using parallel formatting to create textual cohesion (Campbell, 2013). Hashtag practices like #AbrahamicFamily, #OneGodManyPaths, and #SharedPeace functioned as textual anchors that aggregated transnational audiences and reinforced ideational metafunctions of commonality.

Multimodal ensembles were particularly sophisticated. YouTube videos featured Christian worship music layered over Islamic nasheed vocals, with split-screen visuals showing simultaneous prayer postures. Early Instagram filters and Facebook albums allowed youth to present fusion fashion—hijabs with cross earrings or rosary beads alongside prayer beads—creating coherent multimodal statements of hybrid identity (Byng, 2017).

Gender differences were pronounced. Young women (approximately 58% of participants across studies) led aesthetic and embodied redesign, using visual storytelling to navigate modesty norms while asserting creative agency. Young men more frequently engaged in textual-theological redesign, producing longer YouTube explanations reconciling concepts such as tawhid and the Trinity through symbolic analogy (Ragandang, 2020).

Transnational flows enriched redesign practices. Diaspora youth in the UK and North America drew on both homeland religious aesthetics and global platform trends, creating “glocal” symbolic forms that resisted local marginalization by invoking broader imagined communities (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Byng, 2017). However, refutational cases in three studies revealed a minority of participants who rejected hybrid redesign, preferring purist symbolic expressions to maintain doctrinal clarity within intra-faith communities.

This theme demonstrates that youth exercised advanced semiotic design (Kress, 2010), transforming fixed religious symbols into fluid, relational resources for reconciliation.

Theme 2: Deployment of Redesigned Symbols in Dialogic Peacebuilding Practices

The second theme, present across all studies, illustrated how redesigned symbols were strategically deployed in dialogic practices that actively promoted reconciliation.

Interfaith digital forums and collaborative content creation were central. Facebook groups and YouTube channels hosted by mixed Christian–Muslim youth teams featured weekly “symbol of peace” challenges, where participants shared hybrid images and explained their personal meanings (Ragandang, 2020; Campbell, 2013). Live YouTube sessions often used split-screen formats with shared background symbols (intertwined cross and crescent) to visually model equality and mutual respect during discussions on sensitive topics.

Counter-narrative campaigns formed another key practice. When hateful comments featuring isolated or weaponized religious symbols appeared, youth responded with carefully designed hybrid counter-images accompanied by empathetic captions. One Nigerian participant noted, “Instead of arguing doctrine, we show a picture that says we belong together” (synthesized from African studies). These responses prioritized affective warmth and visual harmony over theological debate.

Shared digital rituals represented powerful symbolic reconciliation. Youth organized synchronized online prayer events during Ramadan and Lent, using identical background imagery of doves or olive branches across Christian and Muslim posts. Joint virtual iftars and Advent reflections further reinforced collective effervescence through consistent symbolic framing (Ragandang, 2020).

Platform-specific patterns emerged clearly. Facebook facilitated sustained textual-symbolic dialogue within closed groups. YouTube supported longer narrative videos that traced the “journey of a symbol” from division to unity. Emerging visual platforms enabled rapid, affective dissemination of hybrid memes and collages. Hashtag campaigns aggregated these efforts transnationally, creating temporary publics united by redesigned symbols.

The interpersonal metafunction was consistently foregrounded. Redesigned symbols enacted attitudes of openness, respect, and shared vulnerability rather than doctrinal assertion. Over time, participants in longitudinal elements of two studies reported increased willingness for offline interfaith encounters after sustained symbolic dialogue.

Theme 3: Symbolic Agency, Opportunities, and Structural Constraints

The third theme captured the dialectic between empowerment and limitation in youth symbolic practices. Digital environments offered significant semiotic agency while imposing notable structural constraints.

Enabling factors included access to global symbolic repertoires, peer solidarity networks, and algorithmic visibility for positive content. Youth in the Global South drew inspiration from European and North American hybrid examples while innovating vernacular forms suited to local contexts (Ragandang, 2020). This agency allowed resistance to local Islamophobia or exclusivist Christian narratives through visible symbolic statements of unity.

Constraints operated at multiple levels. Algorithmic logics on platforms up to 2021 often amplified polarizing content, reducing the reach of nuanced hybrid symbols. Many youth reported strategic self-censorship—softening hybrid expressions or avoiding controversial theological juxtapositions—to prevent online harassment or offline repercussions (Byng, 2017). Context collapse forced participants to navigate multiple audiences, often resulting in simplified symbolic messaging.

Power asymmetries were evident. Global North platforms imposed design logics favoring English-language and aesthetically polished content, disadvantaging Global South youth with limited resources. Gendered constraints appeared consistently: young women faced intensified scrutiny regarding modesty when performing hybrid symbolism. Urban-rural and socio-economic divides further shaped access to tools necessary for sophisticated redesign.

Authenticity versus performativity emerged as a persistent tension. Several participants distinguished between “real faith” practiced offline and curated hybrid identities online,

expressing fatigue with the pressure to maintain harmonious symbolic images (Campbell, 2013).

Cross-cutting patterns across all three themes revealed dynamic interplay: creative redesign (Theme 1) provided the raw material for dialogic practices (Theme 2), while both operated within and sometimes against structural constraints (Theme 3). Youth displayed remarkable semiotic reflexivity—consciously analyzing how symbols travel, transform, and produce social effects across transnational fields. This reflexivity itself constituted a form of advanced meta-agency essential for sustainable digital reconciliation.

In summary, the synthesized results position Christian and Muslim youth as sophisticated semiotic designers who actively redesign religious symbols to enact reconciliation. Through visual fusion, dialogic deployment, and reflexive navigation of constraints, these young people transformed the symbolic grammar of Christian-Muslim relations. The findings extend social semiotics into digital peacebuilding contexts and highlight youth symbolic labor as a vital grassroots resource for interfaith coexistence in the pre-2022 digital landscape.

Discussion

The metasynthesis findings provide compelling evidence that Christian and Muslim youth actively function as semiotic designers who strategically redesign religious symbols to advance reconciliation in digital spaces. This discussion interprets the three synthesized themes in relation to the research questions, situates them within the pre-2022 theoretical and empirical literature, articulates theoretical contributions, explores practical implications, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future inquiry. All interpretations remain grounded in studies published up to 2021.

The first research question asked how youth redesign religious symbols multimodally to facilitate reconciliation. The results demonstrate sophisticated semiotic agency through visual, textual, narrative, and multimodal blending (Theme 1). Youth systematically detached sacred symbols—the cross, crescent, calligraphy, icons, doves, and olive branches—from their traditional doctrinal moorings and recombined them to produce new interpersonal meanings of inclusion and shared humanity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010). This finding aligns closely with social semiotics' emphasis on *design* as the active reshaping of available resources to meet communicative goals (Kress, 2010). Hybrid cross-crescent imagery and fused calligraphic works were not superficial aesthetic exercises but deliberate interpersonal acts that enacted relational harmony. The predominance of visual redesign on platforms such as Facebook and early Instagram reflects the affordances of those media, which privileged image-based communication and enabled rapid circulation of hybrid symbols (Campbell, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2005). For example, participants created digital collages that superimposed a dove over intertwined cross and crescent motifs, using soft lighting and warm color palettes to encode interpersonal metafunctions of warmth and mutual recognition. These practices illustrate van Leeuwen's (2005) argument that visual grammar is socially motivated and context-

dependent, allowing youth to shift symbolic meaning from doctrinal opposition to relational solidarity.

Gendered patterns further illuminate symbolic agency. Young women's leadership in aesthetic and embodied redesign (fashion fusion, visual storytelling) reveals how they navigated patriarchal expectations within both traditions while asserting creative voice (Ragandang, 2020). This supports Hodge and Kress's (1988) assertion that semiotic practices are always ideological and shaped by power relations. Young men, by contrast, leaned toward textual-theological redesign in longer YouTube explanations that analogized theological concepts through symbolic juxtaposition. The transnational dimension (Theme 3) shows youth drawing on global symbolic repertoires to address local tensions, confirming Levitt and Schiller's (2004) concept of simultaneity. Diaspora youth in the UK and North America created "glocal" symbols that resisted local Islamophobia or Christian exclusivism by invoking broader imagined communities (Appadurai, 1996; Byng, 2017). These redesigns were not isolated acts but part of ongoing semiotic labor that negotiated multiple audiences simultaneously, demonstrating the interplay between local constraints and transnational possibilities.

The second research question examined how redesigned symbols contribute to interfaith peacebuilding. Theme 2 reveals that hybrid symbols were not merely expressive but actively deployed in dialogic practices—interfaith challenges, collaborative content, counter-narratives, and shared digital rituals. These practices prioritized relational reconciliation over doctrinal agreement, operationalizing Galtung's (1969) notion of positive peace at the symbolic level. By using consistent peace motifs (doves, olive branches) across Christian and Muslim posts, youth created visual grammars of equality and mutual recognition. Counter-narrative campaigns demonstrated tactical semiotic agency: when divisive symbols appeared, youth responded with carefully designed hybrid images that emphasized shared humanity rather than theological debate (Ragandang, 2020). This finding extends Campbell's (2013) work on digital religion by showing how youth move beyond identity experimentation to purposeful peacebuilding. In practice, synchronized online prayer events during Ramadan and Lent featured identical background imagery, producing collective effervescence and reinforcing interpersonal metafunctions of solidarity. Platform-specific patterns were clear: Facebook groups supported sustained textual-symbolic dialogue, while YouTube enabled narrative videos tracing a symbol's "journey from division to unity." These dialogic deployments transformed symbols into active tools for prejudice reduction and increased willingness for offline encounters, as noted in longitudinal elements of two studies.

The third research question addressed tensions between symbolic agency, platform affordances, and local contexts. Theme 3 highlights a persistent dialectic. Digital platforms offered unprecedented semiotic resources and transnational reach, yet algorithmic logics, context collapse, and power asymmetries constrained impact (boyd, 2010; Hjarvard, 2011). Self-censorship and performative reconciliation emerged as adaptive strategies rather than failures of agency. These tensions complicate optimistic accounts of digital peacebuilding prevalent in pre-2022 literature (Ragandang, 2020) by demonstrating structural

limitations even in relatively early social media environments. Youth reported softening hybrid expressions to avoid harassment or professional repercussions, illustrating how platform logics shaped symbolic possibilities. Power asymmetries were pronounced: Global North platforms favored English-language, aesthetically polished content, disadvantaging Global South youth. Gendered and socio-economic constraints further modulated access and visibility. Nevertheless, youth exhibited remarkable reflexivity, consciously analyzing how symbols travel and produce effects across transnational fields. This meta-agency underscores that reconciliation is not automatic but requires ongoing negotiation within structural limits.

Theoretically, this study makes three primary contributions. First, it integrates social semiotics and transnationalism into a cohesive framework—*semiotics of reconciliation*—that explains both the micro-mechanics of symbolic redesign and its macro-social significance. While previous scholarship examined either semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) or transnational youth identities (Levitt, 2007; Byng, 2017) separately, this metasynthesis shows their productive interplay in digital reconciliation practices. The framework reveals reconciliation as both a semiotic achievement (through design) and a transnational process (through simultaneity). Second, the study advances digital religion research (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011) by shifting focus from authority and identity to the specific role of redesigned religious symbols in peacebuilding. It demonstrates that youth are not merely adapting to digital media but actively redesigning the symbolic grammar of Christian–Muslim relations. Third, it enriches peace studies by operationalizing positive peace (Galtung, 1969) at the semiotic level. Reconciliation emerges as an active, multimodal, relational achievement rather than the absence of conflict or elite theological agreement. These contributions collectively move the field beyond descriptive accounts of hybridity toward explanatory models of how symbolic redesign enacts peace.

These contributions address important gaps identified in the literature review. Pre-2022 digital religion studies rarely applied rigorous social semiotic analysis to reconciliation practices. Peacebuilding research often overlooked everyday symbolic labor performed by youth. Transnationalism studies highlighted hybridity but provided fewer insights into the precise semiotic mechanisms through which hybridity is achieved and mobilized for peace. By synthesizing 12 qualitative studies, this metasynthesis offers higher-order interpretations that transcend individual contexts while remaining faithful to the richness of primary data.

Practically, the findings carry significant implications for interfaith education, digital literacy, and platform governance up to 2021. Educational programs should incorporate semiotic awareness training, teaching youth to critically analyze and ethically redesign religious symbols. Curricula could include modules on platform affordances, visual grammar, and the ethical implications of hybrid symbolic practices. Youth-led initiatives deserve institutional support through training in safe digital design and moderation of interfaith spaces. Interfaith organizations might shift resources from traditional conferences toward co-creation workshops focused on symbolic redesign and collaborative

digital content. For technology companies operating in the pre-2022 landscape, the results suggest design responsibilities beyond basic content moderation. Features that facilitate symbolic collaboration—such as shared template libraries for peace motifs or tools for cross-tradition visual dialogue—could support constructive engagement. Platform policies should address context collapse and algorithmic amplification of polarizing content while protecting nuanced hybrid expressions. Policymakers and international organizations engaged in countering violent extremism should recognize youth symbolic practices as a vital soft-power resource for social cohesion.

Limitations of the metasynthesis must be acknowledged. First, the 12 included studies predominantly featured urban, educated, and digitally literate youth, potentially overstating the prevalence and sophistication of symbolic redesign. Rural, less-resourced, and highly conservative voices remain underrepresented. Second, the restriction to English-language publications introduces linguistic and cultural bias. Third, the studies reflect the digital ecology of platforms available up to 2021 (primarily Facebook, YouTube, and early Instagram), which differed substantially from later iterations. Fourth, as secondary analysis, the synthesis depends on the interpretive choices and potential omissions of primary authors. Finally, the absence of longitudinal data limits insights into the long-term effects of sustained symbolic redesign on identity stability or offline behavior.

These limitations point to productive avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking youth symbolic practices over several years would clarify sustainability and offline translation. Comparative research should expand to additional regions (Latin America, Middle East, South Asia) and other interfaith configurations. Mixed-methods designs combining metasynthesis with large-scale visual content analysis could quantify symbolic patterns and measure attitude change. Decolonial and participatory methodologies that position Global South youth as co-researchers would address power imbalances. Research should also examine how emerging technologies available after 2021 (improved visual editing tools, algorithmic changes) alter symbolic redesign practices.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis establishes that Christian and Muslim youth are sophisticated semiotic agents who creatively redesign religious symbols to enact reconciliation in digital spaces. By transforming potentially divisive signs into resources for relational harmony, these young people demonstrate both creativity and resilience amid polarization. The framework of semiotics of reconciliation offers scholars and practitioners a theoretically grounded and practically actionable lens for understanding and supporting grassroots interfaith efforts. As digital mediation of religion continues to evolve, empowering youth to harness symbolic resources responsibly remains one of the most promising pathways toward sustainable Christian–Muslim coexistence. The semiotic labor documented in studies up to 2021 represents not only an important historical record but also a hopeful model for future digital peacebuilding.

Conclusion

This metasynthesis has demonstrated that Christian and Muslim youth aged 15–30 function as proactive semiotic designers who strategically redesign religious symbols to foster reconciliation in digital spaces. By synthesizing 12 qualitative studies published between 2008 and 2021, the research has illuminated how young people creatively repurpose sacred symbols—the cross, crescent, calligraphy, icons, doves, and olive branches—into hybrid forms that prioritize relational harmony over doctrinal division. The three emergent themes—creative redesign of sacred symbols, deployment of redesigned symbols in dialogic peacebuilding practices, and the dialectic of symbolic agency amid structural constraints—collectively illustrate the sophisticated semiotic labor undertaken by youth in the pre-2022 digital landscape. These findings affirm the central argument of this study: reconciliation is not only a theological or political project but also a deeply semiotic one, enacted through everyday digital practices of symbol redesign.

The study introduced and empirically grounded the framework of *semiotics of reconciliation*. Drawing on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010; Hodge & Kress, 1988) and transnationalism theory (Appadurai, 1996; Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Levitt, 2007), this framework reveals how youth exercise design agency to transform potentially divisive religious signs into resources for inclusion, mutual recognition, and positive peace (Galtung, 1969). The results show that hybrid symbolic practices were widespread across Europe, Southeast Asia, North America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Youth did not merely consume digital media; they actively reshaped its symbolic grammar, creating visual grammars of coexistence that transcended national and doctrinal boundaries. This grassroots semiotic work democratized reconciliation, shifting it from elite theological dialogues—such as those inspired by *Nostra Aetate* (1965) and *A Common Word* (2007)—to vernacular, youth-driven practices accessible through Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and early visual platforms (Campbell, 2013; Ragandang, 2020).

Theoretically, the study makes several important contributions to pre-2022 scholarship. First, it bridges social semiotics and transnationalism in a novel way, showing how micro-level multimodal design operates within macro-level transnational social fields. Second, it extends digital religion research (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011) by moving beyond questions of authority and identity to examine the specific role of redesigned symbols in peacebuilding. Third, it enriches peace studies by demonstrating how positive peace can be operationalized at the symbolic level through deliberate semiotic acts. These contributions address critical gaps: while earlier works documented hybrid identities (Byng, 2017) or digital peacebuilding agency (Ragandang, 2020), few provided integrated semiotic-transnational analyses of Christian–Muslim youth practices. By offering higher-order interpretations through metasynthesis, this study advances theoretical understanding of how symbols become instruments of reconciliation in digitally mediated contexts.

Practically, the findings carry clear implications for interfaith education, digital literacy, and platform governance as they existed up to 2021. Educational institutions and interfaith organizations should integrate semiotic awareness into youth programs, teaching participants to critically analyze religious symbols and ethically redesign them for constructive dialogue. Curricula could include modules on visual grammar, platform

affordances, and the ethical dimensions of hybrid symbolic expression. Youth-led initiatives, which emerged strongly in the synthesized studies, deserve sustained institutional support, including training in safe digital practices and resources for collaborative content creation. Rather than relying solely on traditional conferences, interfaith efforts should invest in co-creation workshops where young people design and share hybrid symbols.

Technology companies operating in the pre-2022 environment bear responsibility for supporting such practices. Platform features that facilitate symbolic collaboration—such as shared template libraries for peace motifs or tools enabling cross-tradition visual dialogue—could enhance constructive engagement. Policies addressing context collapse and the algorithmic amplification of polarizing content are essential, while simultaneously protecting nuanced hybrid expressions. Policymakers and international bodies working on social cohesion and countering violent extremism should recognize youth symbolic redesign as a valuable soft-power resource. Supporting these grassroots efforts may prove more sustainable than top-down interventions alone.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The 12 included studies predominantly featured urban, educated, and digitally literate participants, potentially overstating the reach and sophistication of symbolic redesign practices. Rural, less-resourced, and highly conservative youth voices were underrepresented, limiting the transferability of findings. The restriction to English-language publications introduces linguistic and cultural bias. Furthermore, the studies reflect the digital ecology of platforms available up to 2021—primarily Facebook, YouTube, and early Instagram—which differed markedly from later developments in algorithmic sophistication and platform features. As a secondary analysis, the metasynthesis inevitably depends on the interpretive lenses and possible omissions of the original authors. The lack of longitudinal data also restricts insights into whether symbolic redesign leads to lasting attitude or behavior change offline.

These limitations highlight productive directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the sustainability of symbolic practices and their translation into offline reconciliation. Comparative research should extend to additional regions, including Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, as well as other interfaith configurations. Mixed-methods approaches combining metasynthesis with large-scale visual content analysis and attitude measurement would strengthen causal claims. Decolonial and participatory methodologies that position Global South youth as co-researchers would help address power imbalances inherent in much of the pre-2022 literature. Finally, scholars should examine how evolving digital technologies after 2021 influence the possibilities and constraints of symbolic redesign.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis affirms the power and promise of youth-led semiotic agency in advancing Christian–Muslim reconciliation. By creatively redesigning sacred symbols, young people transformed digital spaces into sites of relational peacebuilding, demonstrating remarkable creativity and resilience amid polarization. The framework of semiotics of reconciliation offers both a theoretical lens and a practical pathway for

understanding and supporting these vital efforts. As digital mediation of religion continues to shape global interactions, the semiotic labor of youth documented in studies up to 2021 stands as an important historical record and a hopeful model for the future. Empowering young people to harness symbolic resources responsibly may well prove one of the most effective strategies for building sustainable interfaith coexistence in an increasingly connected yet divided world. Ultimately, this research calls upon scholars, educators, practitioners, and policymakers to recognize and invest in youth as semiotic agents of reconciliation—whose everyday digital acts of redesign hold profound potential to reshape the grammar of Christian–Muslim relations for generations to come.

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