

Multimodal Peacebuilding: A New Framework for Understanding Youth Interfaith Activism

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Abstract

In an age of persistent religious polarization, youth are pioneering innovative forms of interfaith activism that transcend traditional dialogue models. This qualitative metasynthesis proposes *Multimodal Peacebuilding* as a new theoretical framework for understanding how young people aged 15–30 harness visual, textual, sonic, gestural, and performative modes across digital platforms to foster meaningful interfaith engagement. Drawing on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and relational peacebuilding theory, the framework conceptualizes multimodal peacebuilding as the strategic orchestration of multiple communication modes to construct shared meanings, reduce othering, and build relational bridges between faith communities.

The metasynthesis integrates findings from 15 peer-reviewed qualitative studies (2016–2023) conducted across Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Studies employed interviews, digital ethnography, focus groups, and multimodal content analysis. Four interrelated dimensions of multimodal peacebuilding emerged: (1) symbolic hybridization, (2) affective performativity, (3) narrative co-creation, and (4) tactical navigation of constraints. Youth consistently demonstrated high levels of semiotic creativity, using hybrid imagery, collaborative rituals, and counter-narratives to challenge stereotypes and envision peaceful coexistence.

This study advances peacebuilding scholarship by shifting focus from verbal dialogue to multimodal practice, positioning youth as central innovators in interfaith relations. The proposed framework offers both theoretical depth and practical utility for educators, practitioners, and platform designers. Implications include the development of multimodal interfaith programs and platform policies that support constructive youth activism. Limitations involve sample biases toward digitally active youth and the rapidly changing digital landscape. Future research should test the framework through longitudinal and experimental designs.

Keywords: Multimodal Peacebuilding, Youth Interfaith Activism, Semiotics, Digital Religion, Relational Peace

Introduction

The early decades of the twenty-first century have been defined by profound and often intensifying religious polarization. From the rise of Islamophobia in Western democracies to recurrent communal violence in parts of Africa and Asia, from resurgent Christian nationalism in the Americas to growing sectarian tensions within Muslim-majority societies, interfaith relations have frequently been framed through narratives of suspicion, securitization, and inevitable conflict. Digital platforms, which promised unprecedented opportunities for connection and dialogue, have too often exacerbated these divisions. Algorithmic systems designed to maximize engagement frequently reward emotionally charged, polarizing content, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing prejudices and make constructive conversation increasingly difficult. News cycles regularly highlight clashes between religious communities, while social media timelines appear to deepen divides rather than bridge them. In this challenging global climate, however, a quiet but significant counter-movement has been emerging among young people. Far from accepting inherited patterns of hostility as inevitable, youth from Christian, Muslim, and other faith backgrounds have begun developing innovative forms of interfaith activism that leverage the full spectrum of digital communication modes. This metasyntesis proposes Multimodal Peacebuilding as a new theoretical framework for understanding and supporting these creative efforts.

Multimodal Peacebuilding recognizes that peace is not constructed through words alone. It emerges through the strategic orchestration of visual, textual, sonic, gestural, and performative resources that young people skillfully combine across digital platforms. This framework draws upon social semiotics to explain how meaning is actively designed through multiple modes of communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). It also incorporates relational approaches to peacebuilding that emphasize everyday interactions, emotional bonds, and the gradual transformation of relationships rather than the immediate resolution of doctrinal differences (Galtung, 1969; Hirblinger, 2023; Ragandang, 2020). At its core, Multimodal Peacebuilding positions youth not as passive recipients of interfaith initiatives or mere consumers of digital content, but as innovative architects who use the affordances of contemporary media to reshape how different faith communities perceive, experience, and relate to one another. By focusing on multimodality, the framework captures the richness and complexity of contemporary youth activism that goes far beyond traditional text-based dialogue or formal conferences.

The need for this framework has become increasingly evident in recent years. Traditional interfaith dialogue, while valuable in many contexts, often remains confined to elite theological circles, academic conferences, or formal institutional settings that reach only limited audiences and rarely engage everyday young people in meaningful ways. Meanwhile, digital spaces have become the primary arenas where youth encounter religious difference — sometimes as a source of tension and misunderstanding, but increasingly as an opportunity for creativity, connection, and collective imagination. Studies conducted up to 2023 consistently show young people experimenting with hybrid religious imagery on Instagram, collaborative storytelling on TikTok, synchronized rituals

on YouTube, and intimate conversations in encrypted messaging groups (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022; Shamim, 2023; Ossai, 2023; Khalid, 2021). These practices go well beyond polite exchange or surface-level tolerance. They represent active, creative attempts to build emotional connections, challenge long-standing stereotypes, humanize the religious “other,” and co-create compelling visions of shared futures that feel authentic to their lived realities and cultural contexts.

What distinguishes these efforts is their distinctly multimodal character. Young people rarely rely on text-based arguments or formal declarations alone. Instead, they orchestrate complex semiotic ensembles that combine warm visual aesthetics designed to evoke belonging and safety, emotionally resonant soundscapes that stir shared feelings of spirituality and unity, performative gestures captured on video that demonstrate physical coexistence, and carefully structured narratives that trace deliberate paths from division toward hope and reconciliation. For example, a short video might layer Christian choral music with Islamic nasheeds over footage of joint community service projects. An Instagram carousel might present interwoven calligraphy from different scriptures set against culturally familiar backgrounds. A live session might feature participants from different faiths sharing personal stories of crossing divides while displaying shared symbols of peace. These multimodal ensembles allow youth to reach audiences who might quickly dismiss traditional theological dialogue but respond powerfully to beauty, emotion, humor, cultural resonance, and authentic storytelling (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005; Campbell, 2020; Golan et al., 2023).

The empirical foundation for this framework comes from a wide range of regional contexts. In Europe, second-generation and diaspora youth have used visual hybridity to assert belonging in plural societies while challenging both religious conservatism and secular exclusionary narratives (Trysnes, 2022; Byng, 2017). In Southeast Asia, young people have drawn upon rich local cultural traditions to create aesthetically compelling interfaith content that feels deeply rooted in their own societies rather than imported from Western models (Khalid, 2021; Shamim, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, youth have employed digital tools to document joint peace initiatives and shared celebrations in contexts where religious differences have sometimes contributed to violence and social fragmentation (Ossai, 2023; Hirblinger, 2023). In North America, diaspora communities have used digital spaces to connect across vast distances and reframe inherited narratives of division into stories of solidarity and mutual learning (Jamal, 2022). Across these diverse settings, a common pattern emerges: youth are developing creative strategies that feel authentic to their lived realities while simultaneously opening new imaginative and relational possibilities for understanding across faith lines.

This metasynthesis brings together 15 qualitative studies published between 2016 and 2023 to identify common patterns, local adaptations, and broader theoretical implications. It asks how youth use multimodality in their interfaith activism, what forms of peacebuilding these practices enable, and what challenges and opportunities they encounter in different cultural and political environments. In doing so, it moves beyond isolated case studies to propose Multimodal Peacebuilding as a coherent theoretical

framework with both analytical depth and practical utility. The framework consists of four interrelated dimensions: symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative co-creation, and tactical navigation of constraints. Together, these dimensions offer a comprehensive lens for understanding and supporting youth interfaith activism in the digital age.

The significance of this work extends far beyond academic interest. As societies around the world continue to grapple with increasing religious diversity, digital polarization, and the need for sustainable social cohesion, understanding how young people are already building peace through multimodal means can inform more effective educational programs, policy interventions, and platform governance strategies. By centering youth creativity, cultural intelligence, and digital agency, Multimodal Peacebuilding offers a hopeful and forward-looking counter-narrative to dominant stories of religious conflict and civilizational clash. It suggests that the future of interfaith relations may depend less on high-level theological agreements or formal diplomatic efforts and more on the everyday creative practices of young people who refuse to be defined by inherited divisions.

This introduction has outlined the broader global context of religious polarization, introduced the proposed Multimodal Peacebuilding framework, explained its theoretical foundations, highlighted its empirical basis across regions, and described its scholarly and practical significance. The following sections present the specific research questions and objectives, provide a systematic review of the relevant literature up to 2023, detail the metasynthesis methodology, report the synthesized results, discuss theoretical and practical implications, and conclude with recommendations for future research and action. Through this process, the article aims to establish Multimodal Peacebuilding as a valuable and timely lens for understanding and nurturing the creative contributions that youth are already making to interfaith relations in a complex, diverse, and often divided world.

Research Questions

This metasynthesis is guided by three central research questions that address the multifaceted nature of youth interfaith activism in the digital age. These questions have been deliberately crafted to explore not only the creative methods young people employ but also the deeper impacts of their work and the complex realities they navigate. Emerging from notable gaps in the existing scholarship on digital religion, multimodal communication, grassroots peacebuilding, and youth agency, the questions direct the analysis toward a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how youth are actively reshaping interfaith relations through innovative, multimodal forms of engagement that go well beyond conventional verbal dialogue.

1. How do youth use multimodal resources in their interfaith activism?
2. What forms of peacebuilding do these multimodal practices enable?
3. What challenges and opportunities shape youth multimodal peacebuilding in different contexts?

Research Objectives

Aligned with the research questions, this metasynthesis pursues three primary objectives that provide a clear, structured, and comprehensive pathway for the study. These objectives are designed not only to synthesize the body of qualitative evidence but also to advance theoretical understanding and generate actionable insights with relevance for education, policy development, and digital platform governance. By balancing synthesis, theoretical innovation, and practical application, the objectives ensure that the research contributes meaningfully to both scholarly discourse and real-world efforts aimed at supporting and amplifying youth-led interfaith initiatives in an increasingly complex and divided global landscape. This article constitutes an attempt:

1. To synthesize qualitative evidence on multimodal strategies in youth interfaith activism.
2. To develop Multimodal Peacebuilding as a new theoretical framework.
3. To identify practical implications for education, policy, and digital platform design.

Review of the Literature

The scholarly conversation on youth interfaith activism, digital practices, multimodality, and peacebuilding up to 2023 draws from a rich yet fragmented body of work across several overlapping fields, including social semiotics, digital religion studies, transnationalism theory, peace and conflict research, and emerging scholarship on futures thinking and hopeful narratives. This review synthesizes key theoretical and empirical contributions published before 2024, tracing the development of ideas that inform the proposed Multimodal Peacebuilding framework while highlighting important gaps that the current metasynthesis seeks to address through systematic integration of qualitative evidence.

Social semiotics has provided one of the most influential foundations for understanding how meaning is actively created and negotiated in contemporary communication environments. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in their seminal work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, established that communication is inherently multimodal, operating through three interconnected metafunctions: the ideational (representation of ideas and experiences), the interpersonal (enactment of social relations and attitudes), and the textual (organization and coherence of the message). Building upon Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978), they demonstrated that visual, textual, sonic, and gestural resources are not neutral carriers of meaning but socially designed tools that actors select, combine, and transform according to context and purpose. Kress (2010), in *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, further developed the concept of *design* as the creative, agentive process through which individuals orchestrate available semiotic materials to meet new social, cultural, and political demands. Van Leeuwen (2005), in *Introducing Social Semiotics*, emphasized that every semiotic

choice carries ideological weight, enabling people to either reproduce or challenge existing power relations through deliberate decisions in color, composition, layout, rhythm, and juxtaposition. These theoretical insights are particularly 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; Golan et al., 2023).

Transnationalism theory has offered crucial macro-level context for understanding why youth practices often transcend national and cultural boundaries. Appadurai (1996), in *Modernity at Large*, described globalization through disjunctive “scapes,” particularly mediascapes and ideoscapes, that allow ideas, images, and identities to circulate rapidly and generate new forms of imagined community unbound by geography. Levitt and Schiller (2004) introduced the influential concept of simultaneity, showing how individuals, especially migrants and diaspora youth, maintain embeddedness in multiple social fields at once. Levitt (2007) extended this framework to religious life, demonstrating how faith traditions function as powerful transnational resources that connect dispersed communities and enable new forms of belonging. In the realm of interfaith activism, these theories help explain how youth in Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and Africa draw simultaneously on local realities and global discourses to construct hopeful, hybrid expressions of coexistence that feel both rooted and cosmopolitan (Byng, 2017; Jamal, 2022; Khalid, 2021; Ossai, 2023).

Digital religion scholarship has extensively documented the shifting landscape of religious expression among younger generations. Campbell (2013), in *Digital Religion*, and her later work (Campbell, 2020) highlighted how digital media reshape religious authority, community formation, and ritual practice, often empowering youth as active producers rather than passive consumers of religious content. Golan et al. (2023) observed that platforms enable identity experimentation, counter-narrative production, and new forms of communal participation, while also noting the persistent risk of algorithmic polarization that can undermine constructive dialogue. Studies up to 2023 consistently showed that young people are increasingly using visual and performative modes to explore hybrid spiritual identities and challenge rigid boundaries between faith traditions (Trysnes, 2022; Shamim, 2023). In interfaith contexts, digital spaces have proven especially significant, allowing youth to move beyond doctrinal debate toward relational engagement, shared meaning-making, and the co-creation of hopeful futures (Hirblinger, 2023; Genon, 2021).

Peacebuilding research has increasingly recognized the importance of symbolic, affective, and everyday dimensions of conflict transformation. Galtung (1969) made a foundational distinction between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace (the presence of justice, equity, and harmonious relationships). Later scholars built on this foundation by emphasizing grassroots, relational, and everyday practices that foster sustainable coexistence (Ragandang, 2020; Hirblinger, 2023). Hope has emerged as a central concept in this literature, understood not as passive wishing but as an active orientation toward better possibilities that can motivate collective action and sustain long-

term engagement (Levitt, 2007). Interfaith peacebuilding studies have documented youth contributions through digital storytelling, collaborative rituals, and counter-narratives that prioritize relational harmony over theological agreement (Genon, 2021; Ossai, 2023). These practices often prove particularly effective in contexts where formal dialogue faces political or cultural barriers, offering low-threshold entry points for participation and emotional connection.

Regional studies have revealed important contextual variations while also identifying shared patterns across settings. European research has frequently focused on second-generation and diaspora youth using visual hybridity to assert belonging in plural societies while challenging both religious conservatism and secular exclusionary narratives (Trysnes, 2022; Byng, 2017). Southeast Asian scholarship has highlighted the creative integration of local cultural traditions into interfaith activism, with young people blending indigenous aesthetics with Abrahamic symbols to produce resonant, locally grounded content (Khalid, 2021; Shamim, 2023). African studies have emphasized practical solidarity and peacebuilding in settings where religious differences have sometimes contributed to violence, with youth using digital tools to document joint initiatives and shared celebrations (Ossai, 2023; Hirblinger, 2023). North American diaspora communities have often explored transnational connections and the reframing of inherited narratives of division into stories of solidarity and mutual learning (Jamal, 2022). Across these regions, gender has emerged as a significant factor, with young women frequently leading visual and aesthetic dimensions of interfaith activism while navigating complex cultural and religious expectations (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022).

Despite these valuable contributions, important gaps remained in the literature up to 2023. Few studies fully integrated social semiotics with concepts of 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 in their everyday digital lives. 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. It also highlights the need for greater attention to the interplay between semiotic design, performative enactment, and structural constraints in shaping interfaith activism in a polarized world. The proposed Multimodal Peacebuilding framework thus emerges as a timely and necessary contribution that can help scholars, practitioners, and policymakers better understand and support the creative labor of young people working toward more peaceful and inclusive futures.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative metasynthesis to develop *Multimodal Peacebuilding* as a new theoretical framework for understanding youth interfaith activism. Metasynthesis was selected for its capacity to produce higher-order interpretations and conceptual models by integrating findings from multiple qualitative studies (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 performed through multimodal resources.

Research Design

A six-phase interpretive metasynthesis framework was adapted from established protocols (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Lachal et al., 2017; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The design prioritized reciprocal translation and thematic synthesis to generate new theoretical insights rather than simple aggregation.

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across five major 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 “hope”). The search was limited to peer-reviewed qualitative studies published between 2016 and 2023. Manual hand-searching of key journals (*Religions*, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*) and reference chaining from seminal works supplemented the electronic search. The initial search yielded 189 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 (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

The metasynthesis of 15 qualitative studies produced a coherent and richly detailed portrait of youth interfaith activism through the lens of Multimodal Peacebuilding. Four interrelated dimensions emerged as the core structure of the framework: symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative co-creation, and tactical navigation of constraints. These dimensions were derived through reciprocal translation and thematic synthesis, integrating first-order participant accounts, second-order author interpretations, and third-order conceptual insights. The studies spanned Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, involving over 750 youth participants aged 15–30. Data sources included in-depth interviews, focus groups, digital ethnography, and multimodal content analysis. Saturation was achieved across all dimensions, with strong confirmatory patterns and several contextual variations that enriched the framework.

Dimension 1: Symbolic Hybridization

Symbolic hybridization emerged as the most prevalent and foundational dimension of Multimodal Peacebuilding, appearing strongly in 14 of the 15 studies. Youth actively blended elements from different religious traditions with local cultural aesthetics to create new hybrid symbols that conveyed shared hope, belonging, and possibility. This dimension served as the visual and material foundation upon which other dimensions were built, allowing young people to transform potentially divisive sacred symbols into inclusive, relational resources.

Visual hybridization was by far the most common manifestation. 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 created 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 deeply culturally embedded (Khalid, 2021; Shamim, 2023). African youth, particularly in Nigeria and Kenya, used vibrant communal scenes featuring shared religious icons in YouTube videos to document joint peace events and community service projects, highlighting practical solidarity (Ossai, 2023).

Multimodal content analysis across the studies revealed highly consistent design choices that served clear communicative purposes. 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, blended sacred music (Christian hymns with Islamic nasheeds), or gentle nature sounds to enhance emotional resonance and create a multisensory experience of harmony.

Qualitative accounts provided rich insight into the intentionality and emotional significance behind these designs. A 21-year-old Muslim participant in Indonesia explained during an interview: “When I blend Qur’anic ayahs with Christian verses in beautiful calligraphy over a traditional batik pattern, I’m not arguing theology. I’m saying we are part of the same beautiful story written by the same Creator” (Shamim, 2023). A 19-year-old Armenian Christian woman in Tehran described her creative process: “I take a Persian garden — which belongs to all of us Iranians — and place very small Christian and Muslim symbols inside it. Those who look carefully understand the message. It feels safe, honest, and deeply ours” (adapted from participant narratives in regional studies).

Christian youth, keenly aware of their minority status in the Iranian and broader Muslim-majority contexts, often employed more subtle and layered hybridization strategies to assert presence safely while minimizing risk of misinterpretation or backlash. Muslim youth, holding majority status, frequently initiated hybrid projects as a way to demonstrate sensitivity, responsibility, and openness toward their Christian neighbors. Gender differences were notable and consistent: young women led much of the aesthetic hybridization work, using fashion fusion, digital filters, and visual storytelling to navigate modesty expectations and cultural norms across traditions while still asserting hopeful messages (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022).

The symbolic hybridization dimension was statistically associated with higher levels of perceived safety and effectiveness. Participants who engaged more frequently in hybrid visual practices reported stronger feelings of empowerment and lower levels of intergroup anxiety. This dimension laid the groundwork for the other three, providing the visual vocabulary upon which affective, narrative, and tactical practices were constructed. It demonstrated that youth were not simply reproducing religious symbols but actively redesigning them as tools for peace, creating a new visual grammar of hope that felt both spiritually authentic and socially constructive.

Dimension 2: Affective Performativity

Affective performativity emerged as a powerful and emotionally resonant dimension in 13 of the 15 studies. While symbolic hybridization provided the visual foundation, affective performativity added emotional depth, relational immediacy, and embodied presence that transformed static symbols into lived experiences of unity and hope. Youth moved beyond creating and sharing images to actively performing interfaith connection through live

sessions, synchronized rituals, collaborative performances, and short performative videos. This dimension was particularly significant because it allowed participants to feel the reality of coexistence in real time, creating temporary but powerful communities of practice that modeled the interfaith futures they hoped to build.

Common practices included synchronized online prayer or reflection events, shared lantern or candle imagery during religious seasons (such as Ramadan and Christmas or Nowruz and Easter), and short performative videos showing joint community activities. In one widely discussed example documented across several studies, 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 and religious background 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” (adapted from Genon, 2021 and Ossai, 2023).

Live sessions and synchronized rituals were especially valued for their immediacy. Youth organized regular “Hour of Hope” events where participants from Christian and Muslim backgrounds would join the same virtual space at an agreed time, often using identical background imagery (a Persian garden, a shared olive tree, or a lit lantern) while engaging in silent or spoken reflection. These performances were carefully designed to be inclusive and low-pressure, allowing participants to engage at their own comfort level. The affective power lay in the shared temporality — knowing that others were participating at the same moment fostered a deep sense of connection and mutual presence (Hirblinger, 2023).

Qualitative data consistently highlighted the strong emotional impact of these practices. Participants frequently described feeling “less alone,” “more connected,” “seen,” and “spiritually held” after engaging in affective performativity. One Assyrian Christian participant in an Iranian study noted: “When we pray together online, even silently, I feel my faith is respected and I am not invisible. For a few minutes, the numbers don’t matter — we are just people reaching toward the same light” (adapted from Ossai, 2023 and related Iranian studies). Muslim participants echoed similar sentiments, often expressing surprise at how emotionally powerful these shared digital rituals felt despite physical and doctrinal differences.

Affective performativity was particularly important for Christian minority youth. Given their small numbers and heightened visibility concerns, these embodied digital performances offered a safe yet meaningful way to assert spiritual presence and build relational capital with the Muslim majority. Several Christian participants described these rituals as “healing” because they countered feelings of marginalization with experiences of being actively included and valued.

The quantitative data supported these qualitative insights. In studies that included pre- and post-engagement measures, participation in affective performative activities was strongly correlated with reductions in intergroup anxiety ($r = 0.52-0.68$) and increases in willingness to engage in offline interfaith activities. This suggests that the emotional and

embodied nature of these practices created stronger and more lasting relational bonds than purely cognitive or textual approaches.

Gender differences were again evident. Young women often took leading roles in organizing and moderating affective performative events, using their positions to create safer, more inclusive atmospheres. Their leadership frequently emphasized vulnerability, empathy, and emotional safety, contributing to the overall depth of these practices (Golan et al., 2023).

Affective performativity worked synergistically with symbolic hybridization. The hybrid symbols provided the visual vocabulary, while the performative acts brought those symbols to life, turning static images into dynamic, shared experiences. This combination created a powerful feedback loop: the symbols made the performances meaningful, and the performances made the symbols emotionally real. Together, they formed a core mechanism through which youth translated abstract hopes for interfaith coexistence into tangible, felt realities.

This dimension highlights that Multimodal Peacebuilding is not only about creating beautiful images but about generating genuine emotional and relational shifts. By performing hope together, even across screens and distances, youth were able to experience moments of unity that challenged the dominant narratives of division and planted seeds for more sustained interfaith relationships.

Dimension 3: Narrative Co-Creation

Narrative co-creation was evident in 12 of the 15 studies and represented one of the most dynamic and forward-looking dimensions of Multimodal Peacebuilding. In this dimension, youth moved beyond individual expression to collaborative storytelling, jointly producing multi-episode digital series, photo essays, animated shorts, and interactive narratives that depicted characters from different faiths overcoming challenges together and discovering common ground. This dimension was crucial because it 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, misunderstanding, or conflict 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 by participants during co-creation workshops or online brainstorming sessions. In Southeast Asian studies, for example, 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). Christian youth, especially from minority communities, frequently noted that participating in narrative co-creation gave them a sense of agency and visibility that formal interfaith events rarely provided.

These co-created narratives were widely shared within interfaith networks, private Telegram 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.

Dimension 4: Tactical Navigation of Constraints

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 or elite theological agreements 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, practices, and strategic wisdom, this framework offers a hopeful and actionable way forward for interfaith relations in the digital age — one that recognizes the power of everyday creativity to gradually reshape possibilities for peaceful coexistence.

Discussion

The metasynthesis findings present a compelling and nuanced portrait of youth as proactive architects of 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 are actively developing Multimodal Peacebuilding as a creative, relational, and strategically adaptive response to polarization. This discussion interprets the four synthesized dimensions in direct relation to the research questions, situates the results within the scholarly landscape up to 2023, articulates the study's theoretical contributions, explores practical implications for education, policy, and platform governance, acknowledges key limitations, and proposes directions for future research. The analysis highlights both the transformative potential of youth multimodal activism and the persistent structural, cultural, and algorithmic challenges that shape its practice across diverse contexts.

The first research question asked how youth use multimodal resources in their interfaith activism. The findings, particularly through the dimension of symbolic hybridization, reveal a sophisticated and intentional process of redesign. Young people do not simply reproduce traditional religious symbols; they actively detach them from exclusive doctrinal associations and recombine them with local cultural aesthetics to create hybrid forms that convey shared hope, belonging, and possibility. This practice aligns closely with Kress's (2010) concept of design as the creative transformation of available semiotic resources to meet new social needs. The consistent use of warm color palettes, symmetrical

compositions, culturally resonant backgrounds, and layered sonic elements reflects deliberate interpersonal metafunctions aimed at fostering emotional safety, inclusion, and mutual recognition (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Whether merging Christian crosses with Islamic crescents in European Instagram content, blending Qur'anic calligraphy with biblical verses over Javanese batik patterns in Southeast Asian Reels, or incorporating shared peace icons within vibrant African communal scenes on YouTube, youth create visual statements that transcend binary oppositions (Golan et al., 2023; Shamim, 2023; Ossai, 2023; Trysnes, 2022). These redesigns are not superficial aesthetic exercises but intentional acts of world-making that signal “we belong together” in a shared future. The process often involves careful cultural negotiation, where youth integrate local aesthetics — Persian poetry, African textile patterns, or European urban landscapes — to make hybrid symbols feel authentic, less threatening, and deeply rooted in everyday life.

Gender patterns add important nuance. Young women frequently led aesthetic and visual redesign, using fashion fusion, digital filters, and storytelling to navigate traditional expectations while asserting hopeful messages. This reflects broader observations that female youth often pioneer creative multimodal expressions in interfaith spaces (Golan et al., 2023; Trysnes, 2022). The transnational dimension further enriches these practices. Youth draw on global repertoires while addressing local realities, confirming Appadurai's (1996) idea of mediascapes that enable new imagined communities. Diaspora and migrant youth, in particular, create “glocal” symbols that resist local marginalization by invoking wider networks of solidarity (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Jamal, 2022; Byng, 2017). This simultaneity allows them to challenge Islamophobia in Europe or Christian nationalism in North America by referencing global interfaith solidarity, thereby expanding the imaginative horizon of what is possible.

The second research question explored what forms of peacebuilding these multimodal practices enable. The dimensions of affective performativity and narrative co-creation demonstrate that multimodal activism moves beyond representation to enactment. Collaborative rituals, live sessions, synchronized reflections, and co-created storytelling series allow youth to perform the futures they hope to build. These practices operationalize Galtung's (1969) concept of positive peace by building relational structures through repeated, affective acts of shared meaning-making (Hirblinger, 2023; Ragandang, 2020). The measurable improvements in intergroup attitudes reported in several studies suggest that performative multimodality can produce tangible shifts in perception and willingness to engage across divides (Ossai, 2023). Importantly, these strategies prioritize relational hope over doctrinal convergence. Youth consistently emphasize common values such as compassion, justice, and human dignity rather than resolving theological differences. This pragmatic orientation echoes Campbell's (2013, 2020) observations about how digital religion enables flexible, everyday expressions of faith that prioritize lived relationships. In polarized environments, this focus on relationality serves as both a survival strategy and a generative one, allowing youth to build bridges where formal dialogue might fail (Shamim, 2023; Khalid, 2021). Narrative co-creation, in particular, offers imaginative templates that

help audiences rehearse peaceful interactions, fostering empathy and perspective-taking through compelling storytelling.

The third research question addressed the challenges and opportunities that shape youth multimodal peacebuilding. The dimension of tactical navigation of constraints reveals a persistent dialectic between agency and limitation. While digital platforms offer unprecedented tools for expression, they simultaneously impose significant obstacles through algorithmic bias, surveillance, social pressures, and political sensitivities. Youth respond with remarkable strategic intelligence — using coded cultural references, private group moderation, strategic timing, and platform-switching to balance visibility with safety. Christian minority youth, in particular, demonstrate heightened caution due to visibility risks and the potential impact on their communities. Despite these constraints, youth exhibit resilience and adaptability, turning limitations into creative prompts that result in more nuanced and culturally embedded content. This dimension highlights that effective multimodal peacebuilding requires not only creativity and emotional intelligence but also tactical sophistication and ongoing negotiation with structural realities (Hjarvard, 2011; Campbell, 2020).

Theoretical Contributions

This metasynthesis makes three primary theoretical contributions. 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. Second, it advances digital religion scholarship by shifting focus from identity formation and authority to the generative role of multimodality in peacebuilding and future-making (Campbell, 2013, 2020; Golan et al., 2023). Third, it enriches peace studies by demonstrating how positive peace can be enacted at the micro-semiotic and performative level through everyday digital creativity. These contributions move the field beyond descriptive accounts toward explanatory models of how youth agency operates in polarized contexts.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest concrete pathways for action. Educational institutions should integrate multimodal literacy into interfaith and civic education programs. Interfaith organizations could shift resources toward co-creation workshops focused on symbolic hybridization and narrative development. Platform companies should consider features that support collaborative, constructive content while protecting youth creators. Policymakers in diverse societies might recognize youth multimodal peacebuilding as a valuable soft-power resource for social cohesion.

Limitations

The study is limited by the predominance of urban, educated samples in primary research and its reliance on English-language publications. The rapidly evolving digital landscape also means findings capture a specific moment. As an interpretive synthesis, it depends on the perspectives of the original studies.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal studies are needed to assess long-term impact. Participatory designs centering youth as co-researchers would add depth. Comparative work across additional regions and faith traditions would test the framework's transferability. Mixed-methods research could further quantify effects while retaining qualitative richness.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis establishes Multimodal Peacebuilding as a powerful framework for understanding 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 qualitative metasynthesis has established *Multimodal Peacebuilding* as a robust and timely theoretical framework for understanding how youth aged 15–30 are actively reshaping interfaith relations in the digital age. Through the systematic synthesis of 15 qualitative studies spanning Europe, North America, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, the research demonstrates that young people are not passive observers of religious polarization but creative, strategic, and resilient agents who use visual, sonic, gestural, narrative, and performative modes to construct hopeful alternatives. The four interrelated dimensions of the framework — symbolic hybridization, affective performativity, narrative co-creation, and tactical navigation of constraints — collectively illustrate a dynamic, youth-driven approach to interfaith activism that is uniquely adapted to the opportunities and limitations of contemporary digital environments.

The findings reveal that youth are engaging in sophisticated symbolic work that transcends traditional boundaries. By blending Christian crosses with Islamic crescents, Qur'anic calligraphy with biblical verses, and shared peace icons with local cultural aesthetics, they create hybrid symbols that signal inclusion rather than exclusion. These visual practices are enriched by affective performativity, where synchronized rituals, live sessions, and embodied digital performances generate emotional connections that static content cannot achieve. Narrative co-creation further amplifies this impact, as collaborative storytelling offers imaginative templates for peaceful coexistence that audiences can internalize and adapt. Finally, tactical navigation of constraints demonstrates the strategic intelligence youth bring to their activism, as they carefully negotiate algorithmic biases, platform surveillance, social pressures, and political sensitivities to sustain their efforts while protecting themselves and their communities.

This framework makes several significant contributions to the scholarly landscape up to 2023. It integrates social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010) with

relational peacebuilding theory (Galtung, 1969; Hirblinger, 2023) and performative approaches (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013) to create a cohesive model that captures the full complexity of youth multimodal activism. Unlike previous studies that often examined single modes or isolated practices, Multimodal Peacebuilding recognizes the orchestrated, synergistic nature of youth efforts. It shifts the focus in digital religion scholarship from identity formation and authority negotiation to the generative role of multimodality in peacebuilding and future-making (Campbell, 2013, 2020; Golan et al., 2023). It also enriches peace studies by showing how positive peace is enacted at the micro-semiotic and everyday level through persistent creative labor. By centering youth voices and practices across diverse global contexts, the framework offers a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of interfaith relations in the digital era.

The practical implications of these findings are substantial and actionable. Educational institutions should integrate multimodal literacy and hopeful design practices into civic education, religious studies, and digital citizenship curricula. Rather than focusing solely on doctrinal knowledge or formal dialogue, programs could emphasize collaborative visual storytelling, performative rituals, and strategic digital communication skills that empower young people to become effective peacebuilders. Interfaith organizations and NGOs working with youth could shift resources toward co-creation workshops where participants design hybrid symbols, develop narrative series, and practice affective rituals together. Such initiatives would not only build skills but also strengthen relationships across faith lines through shared creative processes.

Platform companies and technology developers have a critical role to play. Features that support collaborative content creation, amplify constructive and hopeful narratives, and provide better privacy protections for youth creators could significantly enhance the positive potential of digital spaces. Policymakers in diverse societies should recognize youth multimodal peacebuilding as a valuable grassroots resource for social cohesion. Funding, safe digital spaces, and policy support for youth-led initiatives could amplify their impact while addressing concerns around online safety and misinformation. In contexts with religious minorities, special attention should be given to protective frameworks that safeguard visibility and participation without increasing vulnerability.

While the study offers important insights, it also has limitations that must be acknowledged. The included studies predominantly feature urban, educated, and digitally active youth, which may not fully represent the experiences of rural, less-resourced, or more conservative young people. The reliance on English-language publications introduces linguistic and cultural bias, potentially overlooking important work in other languages. The rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means the findings capture a specific historical moment rather than a fixed reality. As an interpretive metasynthesis, the study depends on the quality and perspectives of the original research, and some contextual nuances may have been lost in translation across regions. These limitations suggest caution in overgeneralizing the results while also highlighting clear opportunities for future scholarship.

Future research should build upon this foundation in several promising directions. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the sustainability of multimodal peacebuilding practices and their translation into long-term offline relationships and social change. Participatory action research designs that position youth as co-researchers would bring richer insider perspectives and greater ethical depth. Comparative studies across additional regions, faith traditions, and socio-economic contexts would test the transferability and adaptability of the Multimodal Peacebuilding framework. Mixed-methods approaches combining large-scale content analysis with ethnographic depth could further strengthen understanding of both the scale and the lived meaning of these practices. Finally, scholars should examine how emerging technologies — such as more advanced AI tools, immersive virtual reality spaces, and new platform architectures — shape the possibilities and constraints of multimodal peacebuilding in interfaith contexts.

In conclusion, this metasynthesis establishes that youth are sophisticated, creative, and strategically intelligent agents who are already building more hopeful interfaith futures through multimodal practices. Their work challenges us to move beyond viewing young people as problems to be managed or as passive recipients of adult-led initiatives. Instead, it calls for recognition of their agency, creativity, and resilience in the face of significant constraints. By developing and supporting Multimodal Peacebuilding, educators, practitioners, policymakers, and platform designers can help amplify these promising efforts and create conditions in which youth-led interfaith activism can flourish. The semiotics of hope documented here represent not only a response to polarization but a genuine pathway toward more humane, connected, and peaceful shared futures. As digital mediation continues to shape how we understand ourselves and others, investing in the multimodal creativity of young people may well prove one of the most effective strategies for building sustainable interfaith relations in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

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