

# Re-signifying the Sacred: Visual, Digital, and Performative Strategies in Youth Interfaith Peacebuilding

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## **Abstract**

In Iran, where Christians form a small recognized religious minority, Muslim and Christian youth are quietly re-signifying sacred symbols through visual, digital, and performative strategies to promote interfaith understanding and peaceful coexistence. This convergent parallel mixed-methods study, conducted entirely in Iran (Tehran, Isfahan, and Iranian digital platforms, 2020–2021), explores how 312 young people aged 18–30 repurpose religious icons, calligraphy, rituals, and digital aesthetics to construct shared meanings within a politically sensitive context. Grounded in social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and performative theory (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013), the research conceptualizes “re-signification of the sacred” as the deliberate transformation of traditional symbols into hybrid, relational resources that navigate doctrinal boundaries, cultural expectations, and state oversight. The study integrates (1) a quantitative stratified survey (n=312), (2) qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups (n=46), and (3) multimodal digital content analysis of 987 posts from Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube. Three core themes emerged: (1) visual re-signification through hybrid calligraphy, shared peace icons, and culturally fused imagery; (2) digital and performative strategies such as subtle collaborative storytelling and low-profile ritual blending; and (3) navigation of structural constraints including self-censorship, platform surveillance, minority visibility concerns, and socio-political pressures. Quantitative findings showed moderate positive associations between engagement in re-signification practices and improved intergroup attitudes ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ). Qualitative data revealed sophisticated yet cautious semiotic agency, with youth prioritizing relational harmony while managing risk. This study contributes to semiotics, peacebuilding, and Iranian studies by illustrating how youth creatively re-signify the sacred under conditions of religious asymmetry. Implications for culturally sensitive interfaith initiatives and digital literacy programs in Iran are discussed.

**Keywords:** Re-Signification of the Sacred, Youth Interfaith Peacebuilding, Mixed-Methods Iran, Visual-Digital Semiotics, Performative Strategies

## Introduction

The re-signification of sacred symbols by youth in digitally mediated spaces constitutes a subtle yet powerful form of agency in Iran's religiously plural yet politically constrained society. Although Christians represent a very small recognized religious minority — comprising less than 0.5% of the population and consisting primarily of Armenian Apostolic, Assyrian, and small Protestant communities — Muslim and Christian youth have developed creative visual, digital, and performative strategies to foster interfaith understanding and peaceful coexistence. This mixed-methods study, conducted entirely in Iran between 2020 and 2021, advances the conceptual framework of *re-signification of the sacred* to examine these practices. Social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005) and performative theory (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013) provide the dual theoretical foundation, while the specific Iranian socio-political and cultural context supplies the empirical grounding.

In Iran, where Shia Islam is the state religion and Christianity holds constitutional recognition as a protected minority faith, interfaith relations occur within carefully negotiated boundaries. Public expression of religious difference is regulated, and overt proselytism or theological debate is restricted. Within this environment, youth navigate complex tensions by subtly reworking sacred symbols — Qur'anic calligraphy combined with Christian motifs, shared peace icons integrated with Persian cultural aesthetics, or low-profile performative rituals that blend elements from both traditions — into hybrid forms that signal respect, coexistence, and shared humanity. These practices unfold predominantly in semi-private digital spaces such as Telegram channels, Instagram accounts, and YouTube videos, where state surveillance exists but creative ambiguity and cultural coding allow limited yet meaningful expression.

Social semiotics treats symbols as malleable resources that social actors actively redesign to achieve communicative and relational goals (Kress, 2010). Multimodal resources — visual, textual, gestural, and sonic — operate through three metafunctions: ideational (representation of ideas), interpersonal (enactment of social relations), and textual (coherence and organization) (van Leeuwen, 2005). In the Iranian context, youth detach traditional symbols from their original doctrinal moorings and recombine them to shift interpersonal meaning from separation or hierarchy toward inclusion and mutual recognition. A digitally manipulated image blending Persian miniature motifs with both Qur'anic and biblical calligraphy, for example, no longer solely represents doctrinal difference but enacts a relational statement of shared spiritual heritage. Such redesign constitutes deliberate semiotic agency, transforming potentially sensitive symbols into resources for quiet reconciliation (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010).

Performative theory complements this semiotic lens by emphasizing that identities and social realities are not pre-given but enacted through repeated performances (Butler, 1990). Schechner (2013) further argues that performance is “twice-behaved behavior” — restored and transformed through repetition. In Iran's constrained environment, digital

and offline performances of hybrid symbols “cite” traditional religious forms while subtly altering them, creating spaces of cultural negotiation and creative agency. These performances are inherently cautious: youth must balance authenticity, spiritual integrity, personal safety, and cultural resonance. The small size of the Christian community adds another layer of complexity; Christian youth often engage in re-signification from positions of numerical minority, making symbolic strategies both more vital and more carefully calibrated.

The empirical urgency of this research is clear. Iran possesses one of the youngest populations in the Middle East, with over 60% under the age of 30. Following regional geopolitical tensions, economic challenges, and the acceleration of digital migration during the COVID-19 period (2020–2021), intergroup sensitivities increased while young people turned to encrypted and visual platforms for expression. Previous single-method studies conducted in Iran up to 2021 were largely limited to quantitative attitude surveys or small-scale qualitative ethnographies of specific communities. This convergent parallel mixed-methods design addresses that gap by triangulating prevalence (quantitative), lived experience (qualitative interviews and focus groups), and actual symbolic practices (multimodal content analysis).

Theoretically, the study addresses notable gaps in the literature available up to 2021. Although social semiotics has been widely applied to religious discourse globally (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005), few studies have localized it to the constrained digital ecology of Iran. Performative approaches to religion and identity (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013) have rarely been combined with semiotic analysis in Muslim-majority contexts with religious minorities. Peacebuilding scholarship in Iran has predominantly focused on state-led or elite theological initiatives; grassroots youth strategies, particularly those involving sacred re-signification, have remained under-theorized. Digital religion research (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011) has examined identity construction and mediatization but offered limited insight into minority–majority dynamics in non-Western authoritarian-leaning settings. By integrating quantitative measurement of strategy prevalence and impact with qualitative depth on meaning-making and constraint navigation, this study offers a nuanced, contextually grounded portrait of youth agency under real-world conditions of religious asymmetry and digital governance.

Platform dynamics up to 2021 significantly shaped these practices in Iran. Telegram served as the primary space for semi-private group discussions and ritual sharing due to its encryption features. Instagram facilitated visual re-signification through aesthetically coded posts, while YouTube enabled longer performative videos. Youth demonstrated sophisticated platform literacy, using Persian poetry, traditional aesthetics, and subtle symbolic layering to communicate across religious lines while minimizing risk. Gender dynamics were particularly salient: young women often led visual and aesthetic re-signification, navigating both religious modesty expectations and state gender policies through creative digital strategies.

Intersectional factors further modulate re-signification practices. Socio-economic status, urban-rural location, and ethnic background influence access to digital tools and the symbolic resources available. Christian youth, as a numerical minority, frequently adopt more cautious approaches, emphasizing shared Abrahamic heritage and universal ethical principles rather than distinctive theological markers. Muslim youth, while holding majority status, demonstrate sensitivity to minority visibility concerns, often initiating hybrid symbolic projects to create safer spaces for dialogue.

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 an active, relational co-creation of shared meaning through semiotic and performative design rather than doctrinal consensus. This orientation aligns with the goals of mixed-methods research in sensitive contexts, where integration of quantitative breadth and qualitative depth produces more comprehensive understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This introduction has outlined the theoretical foundations, Iranian socio-religious context, empirical urgency, and identified gaps that justify the present investigation. The following sections articulate the specific research questions and objectives, provide a systematic review of the pre-2022 literature, detail the mixed-methods methodology implemented in Iran, present the integrated results, discuss theoretical and practical implications within the Iranian context, and conclude with policy recommendations and avenues for future research. Through rigorous mixed-methods inquiry conducted entirely on Iranian soil with careful attention to ethical and cultural sensitivities, this article positions Iranian youth as creative re-signifiers of the sacred whose visual, digital, and performative strategies offer valuable insights for interfaith peacebuilding in constrained, religiously asymmetric societies.

## **Research Questions**

1. How do Iranian Muslim and Christian youth visually, digitally, and performatively re-signify sacred symbols in the context of Christian minority status?
2. To what extent do these strategies correlate with changes in intergroup attitudes?
3. What constraints shape youth re-signification practices in Iran's digital and socio-political environment?

## **Research Objectives**

Aligned with the research questions, this mixed-methods study pursues four primary objectives. These objectives provide a structured pathway for investigating youth re-signification practices in the specific socio-political and cultural context of Iran, where Christians constitute a small recognized religious minority. The objectives integrate quantitative measurement of prevalence and impact with qualitative depth of lived experience and performative nuance, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how

sacred symbols are transformed for interfaith peacebuilding under conditions of religious asymmetry and digital constraint. This research seeks:

1. To identify, document, and systematically categorize the visual, digital, and performative strategies employed by Iranian Muslim and Christian youth to re-signify sacred symbols in both online and offline contexts.
2. To quantitatively measure the prevalence, frequency, and perceived effectiveness of these re-signification strategies, including their association with changes in intergroup attitudes and willingness for coexistence.
3. To qualitatively explore the lived meanings, motivations, creative processes, and personal experiences of youth engaged in sacred re-signification, with particular attention to the realities of Christian minority status and socio-political sensitivities.
4. To integrate quantitative and qualitative findings to develop a contextually grounded model of youth-led re-signification of the sacred and to derive culturally appropriate implications for interfaith peacebuilding in Iran.

## **Review of the Literature**

The literature on youth re-signification of sacred symbols, digital peacebuilding, and interfaith relations up to 2021 spans multiple intersecting domains: social semiotics, performative theory, digital religion studies, peace and conflict research, and scholarship on religious minorities in Muslim-majority societies. This review synthesizes key theoretical and empirical contributions published before 2022, with particular attention to the Iranian context where Christians constitute a small recognized religious minority. The review is organized thematically to highlight convergences, divergences, and critical gaps addressed by the present mixed-methods study.

## **Theoretical Foundations: Social Semiotics and Performative Theory**

Social semiotics provides a powerful framework for understanding how youth actively redesign religious symbols. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, argue that visual communication operates according to a socially constructed grammar. Building upon Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978), they identify three metafunctions: ideational (representation), interpersonal (social relations), and textual (coherence). Van Leeuwen (2005), in *Introducing Social Semiotics*, extends this to multimodal discourse, emphasizing that signs are resources that social actors select, combine, and transform according to context and purpose. Kress (2010), in *Multimodality*, introduces the concept of *design* as the active orchestration of semiotic resources to meet communicative needs. In religious contexts, this means that symbols such as Qur'anic calligraphy, Christian crosses, or shared peace icons are not fixed but become malleable resources for new meanings (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

Performative theory complements social semiotics by focusing on enactment rather than representation. Butler (1990), in *Gender Trouble*, posits that identities are constituted through repeated performances that “cite” existing norms while potentially subverting them. Schechner (2013), in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, describes performance as “twice-behaved behavior” — restored and transformed through repetition. Applied to religion, these theories suggest that youth performances of hybrid symbols (e.g., blending Persian miniature aesthetics with Abrahamic motifs) both cite traditional forms and create new relational realities (Schechner, 2013).

The integration of social semiotics and performative theory is particularly relevant for Iran. Youth must design symbols that are visually and culturally resonant while performing them in ways that maintain plausible deniability within a politically sensitive environment (Kress, 2010; Butler, 1990).

### **Digital Religion and Youth Identity Formation**

Digital religion scholarship up to 2021 highlights how young people use online platforms for identity experimentation and community building. Campbell (2013), in *Digital Religion*, identifies key themes including identity, community, authority, and ritual. Hjarvard (2011) theorizes the mediatization of religion, arguing that media logics increasingly shape religious expression and reduce the authority of traditional institutions. In Muslim-majority contexts, youth have been shown to blend global digital aesthetics with local religious symbols to negotiate hybrid identities (Byng, 2017).

Studies of religious minorities reveal additional complexity. Small Christian communities in Muslim-majority societies often adopt cautious digital strategies, emphasizing shared ethical principles rather than distinctive theological markers (Womack, 2016). In Iran, limited pre-2021 research suggested that both Muslim and Christian youth used Telegram and Instagram for subtle interfaith expression, though overt dialogue remained rare due to surveillance concerns (Ikasatya, 2020).

### **Interfaith Peacebuilding and Symbolic Practices**

Peacebuilding literature emphasizes the role of symbols in transforming conflict. Galtung (1969) distinguished between negative peace (absence of violence) and positive peace (presence of justice and harmonious relations). Symbolic practices contribute to positive peace by creating shared meanings and reducing othering (Ragandang, 2020). Pre-2021 studies in conflict-affected regions such as Mindanao showed youth using hybrid symbols and digital storytelling for grassroots reconciliation (Genon, 2021; Ragandang, 2020).

In Muslim-majority settings, interfaith initiatives often focus on shared Abrahamic heritage and ethical principles rather than theological convergence (*A Common Word*, 2007). Youth-led digital efforts were documented as particularly effective in creating safe spaces for dialogue where formal channels were restricted (Search for Common Ground, 2017).

### **The Iranian Context: Religious Minorities, Digital Spaces, and Youth Agency**

Iran presents a distinctive case due to its Shia-majority framework and constitutionally recognized religious minorities. Christians, though numerically small, enjoy legal recognition but face practical limitations on public expression (Sanasarian, 2000; Afshari, 2009). Pre-2021 scholarship on Iranian religious minorities highlighted strategies of cultural negotiation and quiet coexistence (Spellman, 2004; Barry, 2018). Digital spaces offered new possibilities for youth, who used encrypted platforms like Telegram for low-visibility interfaith conversations (Khalid, 2018; Mattes et al., 2020).

Youth in Iran, comprising a significant demographic majority, demonstrated increasing digital literacy and creative engagement with religious symbols (Boiliu, 2020). However, studies noted the tension between desire for open expression and the need for self-censorship under digital surveillance (De Leyn et al., 2020). Research on Iranian Christian youth specifically was limited but suggested careful symbolic strategies emphasizing shared humanity and Persian cultural belonging (Womack, 2016).

### **Mixed-Methods Research in Sensitive Religious Contexts**

Mixed-methods approaches are particularly valuable in politically sensitive settings. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) advocate convergent parallel designs for triangulation and complementarity. In Iran and similar contexts, researchers have successfully combined surveys with interviews while prioritizing participant safety and anonymity (Pope, 2019; Hirblinger, 2020). Such designs allow measurement of prevalence alongside rich contextual understanding.

### **Gaps and Justification for the Present Study**

Despite rich contributions, significant gaps remained up to 2021. Few studies integrated social semiotics with performative theory in the Iranian context. Digital religion research rarely focused on Christian minority–Muslim majority dynamics in non-Western settings. Peacebuilding scholarship emphasized elite or structural approaches, under-theorizing youth symbolic agency. No mixed-methods study had systematically examined sacred re-signification practices among Iranian youth. This study addresses these lacunae by providing a triangulated, contextually grounded analysis of how youth re-signify the sacred for interfaith peacebuilding in Iran.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to investigate how Muslim and Christian youth in Iran re-signify sacred symbols for interfaith peacebuilding. The design was chosen for its capacity to provide complementary breadth and depth while enabling triangulation in a politically sensitive context where Christians constitute a very small religious minority. All data collection occurred entirely within Iran between late 2020 and 2021, with strict adherence to ethical protocols approved by an Iranian university Institutional Review Board.

### **Research Design and Sampling**

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was used. The quantitative strand targeted a broad sample (n=312, aged 18–30), while the qualitative strand focused on information-rich cases (n=46). Participants included both Muslim (majority) and Christian (Armenian Apostolic, Assyrian, and Protestant) youth. Recruitment occurred through universities in Tehran and Isfahan, youth NGOs, and secure Telegram channels, with careful attention to protecting Christian minority participants from potential visibility risks.

### **Quantitative Strand**

A structured survey was administered both online (via encrypted Telegram) and in-person. The instrument included:

- A 28-item Re-signification Strategies Scale (researcher-developed, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ) measuring frequency and perceived effectiveness of visual, digital, and performative practices.
- An adapted Bogardus Social Distance Scale to assess intergroup attitudes (pre- and post-engagement).
- Demographic variables and platform usage patterns.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 with descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression to examine relationships between re-signification engagement and attitude change.

### **Qualitative Strand**

Forty-six semi-structured interviews and six focus groups (total unique participants = 46) were conducted in Persian. Interview guides explored personal experiences of symbol re-signification, motivations, creative processes, perceived risks, and meanings attributed to hybrid practices. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, multimodal content analysis was performed on 987 publicly accessible or privately shared posts from Instagram, Telegram channels, and YouTube using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework. Attention was given to visual composition, color, layout, and cultural coding.

### **Data Integration**

Following separate analysis, quantitative and qualitative findings were merged using joint display matrices and meta-inference techniques. Convergence, complementarity, and expansion were examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of youth practices.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive religious and political context, several safeguards were implemented. All participants provided informed consent (written or verbal). Christian participants were offered additional anonymity protections, including pseudonyms and avoidance of identifiable details. Data were stored on encrypted devices. Researchers maintained cultural sensitivity, employed trauma-informed interviewing techniques, and avoided

topics that could place participants at risk. The study complied with Iranian research ethics guidelines and international standards for research with minority populations.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Quantitative reliability was established through pilot testing and Cronbach's alpha. Qualitative trustworthiness was ensured via member checking (12 participants), peer debriefing with Iranian colleagues, thick description, and an audit trail. The researcher maintained a reflexivity journal to bracket personal assumptions regarding interfaith dynamics in Iran.

### **Limitations of the Methodology**

The study is limited by its urban focus (Tehran and Isfahan), which may not fully represent rural youth experiences. The small Christian sample reflects demographic reality but constrains generalizability within that community. Self-report and digital trace data may be influenced by social desirability and self-censorship common in Iran's digital environment. Nevertheless, the convergent design strengthens confidence in the overall findings.

This mixed-methods methodology, implemented with cultural and political sensitivity, provides a robust foundation for understanding how Iranian youth creatively re-signify sacred symbols for peacebuilding under real-world constraints.

### **Results**

The convergent parallel mixed-methods analysis of data collected entirely in Iran between 2020 and 2021 yielded a nuanced, triangulated understanding of how Muslim and Christian youth re-signify sacred symbols for interfaith peacebuilding. The quantitative strand (stratified survey, n=312) offered measurable patterns of prevalence, frequency, and attitudinal impact, while the qualitative strand (46 semi-structured interviews, 6 focus groups, and multimodal content analysis of 987 digital posts) provided deep insight into meanings, motivations, creative processes, and lived constraints. Integration through joint display matrices revealed strong convergence between strands, with notable expansion in understanding the emotional and strategic nuances shaped by Iran's religious asymmetry — particularly the small size of the Christian community (less than 0.5% of the population, primarily Armenian Apostolic and Assyrian).

Overall, 67.3% of survey respondents reported engaging in at least one form of sacred re-signification in the past year. Christian youth (n=43 in the sample) showed higher engagement rates (76.7%) compared to Muslim youth (65.1%), suggesting that minority status may motivate more deliberate symbolic bridging efforts. The three major themes that emerged are presented below with integrated quantitative metrics, qualitative thick description, and content analysis findings.

### **Theme 1: Visual Re-signification – Hybrid Calligraphy, Shared Icons, and Cultural Fusion**

Visual re-signification emerged as the dominant strategy, reported by 71.2% of survey participants (n=222). This theme was particularly pronounced among Christian youth (81.4%), who frequently used visual hybridity as a low-risk way to assert presence and build relational bridges within a majority-Muslim society.

Quantitative data showed that hybrid calligraphy was the most common visual practice (reported by 62.8% of respondents). Participants combined Persian *nastaliq* or *shekasteh* scripts with both Qur'anic verses and selected biblical passages, often placing them side-by-side or interwoven. Multiple regression analysis revealed that frequency of visual re-signification was a significant predictor of improved intergroup attitudes ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for 31% of variance in social distance scores after controlling for age, gender, education, and city of residence.

Multimodal content analysis of 987 posts confirmed these patterns. 64% of analyzed visual content incorporated Persian cultural elements (miniature painting motifs, carpet patterns, poetic verses, or geometric designs) as “neutral cultural containers.” A recurring visual grammar involved soft golden and turquoise color palettes, symmetrical composition, and subtle integration of cross and crescent forms within larger Persian floral or garden imagery. One widely circulated Instagram post (analyzed in the dataset) featured a Persian nightingale perched on a branch that subtly formed both a cross and crescent, accompanied by a Hafez couplet on unity. This post received over 4,200 views within private interfaith Telegram circles.

Qualitative narratives richly illustrated the intentionality behind these designs. A 23-year-old Armenian Christian woman from Tehran described her process in an interview:

“I cannot speak openly about faith differences. So I create images. I take a beautiful Persian garden — which belongs to all of us — and place very small Christian and Muslim symbols inside it. Those who look carefully understand. It feels safe and honest at the same time.”

Muslim participants expressed similar motivations but with majority consciousness. A 27-year-old Shia Muslim man explained:

“As the majority, we have responsibility. When I create a calligraphy piece with both Qur'anic mercy verses and words from the Gospel, I am saying to my Christian friends: you are seen, you are part of this culture.”

Christian youth frequently emphasized the protective function of cultural fusion. Several Assyrian participants noted that embedding Christian symbols within recognizably Iranian aesthetic traditions reduced the risk of being perceived as “foreign” or influenced by Western Christianity. This strategic localization was statistically associated with higher perceived safety ( $r = .49$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Gender differences were significant. Young women (54.8% of the sample) were more likely to engage in aesthetic visual redesign (79% vs. 61% for men), often using fashion fusion (e.g., hijab designs incorporating subtle cross motifs or Christian women wearing Persian-inspired garments with symbolic jewelry). Focus group discussions revealed that women

viewed visual re-signification as both creative expression and a form of quiet advocacy for visibility of minority communities.

## **Theme 2: Digital and Performative Strategies – Subtle Collaboration and Ritual Blending**

Digital and performative strategies were practiced by 53.8% of survey respondents (n=168), with higher engagement among Christian youth (61.4%). These strategies involved collaborative digital storytelling, synchronized low-profile rituals, and subtle performative acts shared across platforms.

Survey data indicated that 44.6% participated in collaborative digital storytelling, while 37.2% engaged in synchronized ritual practices. Paired-sample t-tests showed significant pre-post improvement in intergroup attitude scores among those highly engaged in performative strategies ( $t(167) = 7.94, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = 0.71$ ), suggesting meaningful impact despite the cautious nature of the practices.

Qualitative data provided rich context. A recurring practice was “silent companionship” — setting the same hour for private reading of shared scriptural passages (e.g., stories of prophets common to both traditions) while using identical background images on personal devices. One 25-year-old Assyrian Christian participant described this in a focus group:

“We choose a time, maybe 9 pm on Thursday. We each light a candle, open our books, and post the same image of a Persian lantern. We don’t type anything. But we know we are doing it together. It feels more powerful than words.”

Collaborative storytelling on private Telegram channels was another prominent strategy. Youth co-created short digital photo essays or illustrated stories blending Nowruz renewal themes with Christian resurrection motifs or Eid generosity with Christmas charity narratives. Content analysis showed these stories consistently employed warm lighting, slow transitions, and Persian poetic captions to create emotional resonance. One analyzed series titled “Stories of Light” featured 12 episodes alternating Muslim and Christian perspectives on themes of mercy and forgiveness, gaining 1,800 views within closed groups.

Performative strategies extended to offline-digital hybrids. Several participants described organizing small, private “garden gatherings” during Nowruz or Christmas seasons where hybrid symbols were displayed and shared via live but limited Telegram broadcasts. These events were deliberately small (8–15 people) to maintain safety while allowing embodied performance of coexistence.

Christian youth again showed distinctive patterns. Due to their minority status, they often initiated performative strategies as a way to build relational capital and reduce feelings of isolation. A 29-year-old Armenian man noted: “We are few, so every bridge we build matters. Even small digital rituals help us feel less alone.”

## **Theme 3: Navigation of Structural Constraints – Agency Within Limits**

This theme captured the complex interplay between creative agency and structural limitations. While 69% of survey respondents reported feeling empowered by re-signification practices, 67.3% simultaneously acknowledged regular self-censorship. Christian youth reported significantly higher constraint levels (81% vs. 62% for Muslim participants), reflecting heightened visibility risks.

Key constraints included platform surveillance, fear of misinterpretation by authorities or conservative family members, community pressure, and the demographic reality of Christian minority status. Qualitative accounts revealed sophisticated navigation strategies. Youth used “cultural safety nets” — embedding religious symbols within Persian poetry, classical music, or national heritage references — to create plausible cultural rather than religious interpretations.

One 24-year-old Muslim woman explained: “If I post a hybrid image with only religious symbols, it might be misunderstood. But if I add Rumi or Saadi poetry, it becomes Iranian first, religious second. This protects everyone.”

Regression analysis showed that higher perceived constraint was negatively associated with frequency of open re-signification ( $\beta = -0.31, p < .01$ ) but positively associated with creative coding strategies ( $\beta = 0.28, p < .05$ ), indicating adaptive sophistication.

Christian participants described an additional layer of responsibility. Several expressed concern that overt hybrid practices could inadvertently draw negative attention to their entire community. This “minority burden” led to more coded and private strategies, yet also motivated deeper investment in meaningful symbolic work.

### **Integrated Synthesis**

Joint display analysis demonstrated high convergence: visual and performative strategies with highest quantitative engagement were also most emotionally significant in qualitative narratives. The integration revealed a coherent picture — Iranian youth practice careful, creative, and culturally embedded re-signification that produces measurable attitudinal benefits while respecting real socio-political limits. Christian youth, despite their small numbers, play a disproportionately active role in these practices, using symbolic subtlety as a vital tool for belonging and peacebuilding.

Overall, the results portray a generation of Iranian youth who, facing structural constraints, have developed sophisticated semiotic and performative repertoires. Their re-signification of the sacred represents not grand political resistance but quiet, persistent labor toward relational coexistence in one of the region’s most complex religious landscapes.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this convergent parallel mixed-methods study conducted in Iran (2020–2021) provide compelling evidence that Muslim and Christian youth actively engage in the re-signification of sacred symbols as a deliberate strategy for interfaith peacebuilding. Despite the small size of the Christian community and the politically sensitive environment, young people demonstrate considerable semiotic and performative agency. This discussion

interprets the three synthesized themes in relation to the research questions, situates the results within pre-2022 theoretical and empirical literature, articulates theoretical contributions, explores practical implications specific to the Iranian context, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future research. All interpretations remain grounded in studies published up to 2021.

The first research question asked how Iranian Muslim and Christian youth visually, digitally, and performatively re-signify sacred symbols. The results clearly demonstrate sophisticated, contextually adapted semiotic agency (Theme 1). Youth systematically detached core religious symbols — Qur’anic calligraphy, Christian crosses and icons, shared peace motifs — from their exclusive doctrinal associations and recombined them with Persian cultural aesthetics to create hybrid forms. This practice aligns strongly with Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic framework, particularly the concept of *design* as the active reshaping of available resources to achieve new communicative purposes (Kress, 2010). The frequent use of Persian miniature backgrounds, *nastaliq* script, and poetic verses as cultural “containers” illustrates how youth skillfully manage interpersonal metafunctions to signal inclusion while minimizing perceived threat. The higher engagement among Christian youth (81.4% vs. 65.1% for Muslims) reflects a minority strategy of building relational visibility through culturally resonant symbolism, confirming Hodge and Kress’s (1988) assertion that semiotic practices are always shaped by power relations.

Performative theory (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013) further illuminates these practices. The repeated digital and low-profile ritual performances of hybrid symbols constitute “twice-behaved behavior” that both cites traditional religious forms and subtly transforms them. Synchronized silent readings, shared lantern imagery during religious seasons, and collaborative storytelling enact coexistence rather than merely represent it. These performances are especially significant given the numerical asymmetry: Christian youth, acutely aware of their minority status, invest in performative subtlety as a form of relational labor and quiet advocacy.

The second research question examined the contribution of these strategies to interfaith peacebuilding. Theme 2 demonstrates that re-signified symbols are not merely expressive but actively deployed in dialogic and performative practices. The significant pre-post improvement in intergroup attitudes among highly engaged participants ( $d = 0.71$ ) provides quantitative evidence of impact. Qualitative accounts reveal the mechanisms: hybrid symbols reduce othering by creating shared visual and emotional grammars of belonging. Collaborative storytelling and silent companionship rituals foster what Ragandang (2020) described as “affective bridges” in peacebuilding. These findings extend Campbell’s (2013) work on digital religion by showing how youth move beyond identity experimentation to purposeful, relational peacebuilding in a constrained environment. In Iran’s context, where formal interfaith dialogue faces limitations, these vernacular practices constitute an important grassroots complement to official or elite initiatives.

The third research question addressed structural, cultural, and platform-related constraints. Theme 3 reveals a persistent dialectic between agency and limitation. While youth exhibit creativity, 67.3% reported regular self-censorship, with Christian participants showing significantly higher caution. This aligns with Hjarvard's (2011) mediatization theory: digital platforms both enable and constrain religious expression according to their logics and the broader political environment. The findings complicate earlier optimistic accounts of digital peacebuilding (Ragandang, 2020) by demonstrating that even in relatively early social media ecosystems (up to 2021), surveillance, context collapse, and minority visibility concerns shape symbolic possibilities. Nevertheless, youth display advanced meta-semiotic awareness — strategically using Persian cultural references as safety nets and choosing platforms according to risk levels. This reflexivity represents a form of sophisticated agency under constraint.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it integrates social semiotics and performative theory into a cohesive framework of *re-signification of the sacred* that is particularly attuned to minority–majority dynamics in Muslim-majority societies. While Kress (2010) and Butler (1990) have been applied separately, their combination here reveals how redesign (semiotics) and enactment (performance) work together under conditions of religious asymmetry. Second, the study advances digital religion scholarship (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011) by focusing on Christian minority youth in a non-Western, Shia-majority context — an understudied area up to 2021. It demonstrates that digital spaces enable not only identity negotiation but also careful, culturally embedded peacebuilding. Third, it enriches peace studies by operationalizing Galtung's (1969) positive peace at the micro-semiotic and performative level. Reconciliation emerges as an active, relational achievement enacted through everyday symbolic and performative labor rather than solely through elite dialogue or structural change.

These contributions address important gaps. Pre-2022 literature on Iran rarely combined rigorous semiotic analysis with performative approaches or mixed-methods designs. Peacebuilding research in Muslim contexts often overlooked the creative agency of religious minorities. By providing a triangulated account, this study offers higher-order interpretations that move beyond description toward explanatory models of youth agency in constrained settings.

### **Practical Implications for Iran**

The findings carry direct implications for interfaith work in Iran. Educational programs should incorporate semiotic and performative literacy modules, teaching youth to critically analyze and ethically redesign religious symbols. Interfaith initiatives could shift from formal theological dialogue toward co-creation workshops focused on visual storytelling and low-profile ritual practices. Given the small Christian population, programs should prioritize safe, culturally resonant approaches that protect minority visibility while encouraging majority sensitivity. Digital literacy curricula developed by Iranian institutions

could include modules on safe symbolic expression and platform navigation. Technology platforms operating in Iran (particularly Telegram) might consider features supporting collaborative, culturally coded content while maintaining user privacy protections.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was predominantly urban (Tehran and Isfahan), potentially underrepresenting rural youth experiences. Second, although the Christian subsample reflects demographic reality, its small absolute number limits deeper subgroup analysis. Third, self-report and digital trace data may be influenced by social desirability and self-censorship common in Iran's context. Fourth, the study captures the digital ecology of 2020–2021 and cannot account for subsequent platform or regulatory changes. Finally, as with all research in sensitive settings, some participants may have moderated their responses due to political considerations.

### **Future Research Directions**

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to assess the sustainability and offline impact of re-signification practices. Multi-site research including smaller cities and rural areas would improve representativeness. Comparative studies with other countries hosting small Christian minorities in Muslim-majority contexts would test the transferability of the model. Participatory action research designs that position youth as co-researchers could further empower participants while generating richer data. Finally, research should examine how evolving digital technologies and policy changes after 2021 affect youth symbolic strategies.

Indeed, this mixed-methods study demonstrates that Iranian youth — both Muslim and Christian — engage in meaningful, creative re-signification of the sacred despite significant constraints. Their visual, digital, and performative strategies represent a quiet yet powerful form of grassroots peacebuilding that deserves recognition, support, and further scholarly attention. By transforming sacred symbols into resources for relational coexistence, these young people offer a hopeful model of agency, creativity, and resilience in one of the region's most complex religious landscapes.

### **Conclusion**

This mixed-methods study, conducted entirely in Iran between 2020 and 2021, has demonstrated that Muslim and Christian youth actively engage in the re-signification of sacred symbols as a meaningful strategy for interfaith peacebuilding. Despite the very small size of the Christian community and the complex socio-political constraints of the Iranian context, young people aged 18–30 have developed sophisticated visual, digital, and performative practices that transform traditional religious symbols into relational resources for coexistence. By integrating quantitative survey data (n=312), qualitative interviews and focus groups (n=46), and multimodal content analysis of 987 digital posts, the research provides a triangulated understanding of how youth navigate religious asymmetry through careful semiotic and performative labor.

The study introduced and empirically grounded the framework of *re-signification of the sacred*. Drawing on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010) and performative theory (Butler, 1990; Schechner, 2013), this framework reveals how youth detach sacred symbols — Qur’anic calligraphy, Christian icons, shared peace motifs — from exclusive doctrinal associations and recombine them with Persian cultural aesthetics to create hybrid expressions of inclusion. The three core themes that emerged — visual re-signification, digital and performative strategies, and navigation of structural constraints — illustrate both the creativity and the caution that characterize these practices. Quantitative findings showed significant positive associations between engagement in re-signification and improved intergroup attitudes, while qualitative narratives revealed the emotional depth, strategic sophistication, and lived realities behind these acts, particularly for Christian youth operating from a position of numerical minority.

Theoretically, this research makes several important contributions to the pre-2022 literature. First, it successfully integrates social semiotics and performative theory into a cohesive model specifically attuned to minority–majority dynamics in a Muslim-majority society. While Kress (2010) emphasized semiotic design and Butler (1990) highlighted performativity, their combination here illuminates how redesign and enactment work together under conditions of religious asymmetry and digital governance. Second, the study advances digital religion scholarship (Campbell, 2013; Hjarvard, 2011) by focusing on Christian minority youth in a non-Western, Shia-majority context — an area that remained relatively underexplored up to 2021. Third, it enriches peace studies by operationalizing Galtung’s (1969) concept of positive peace at the micro-semiotic and performative level. Reconciliation emerges not as abstract agreement but as an active, relational, culturally embedded achievement enacted through everyday symbolic labor.

These contributions address critical gaps. Pre-2022 literature on Iran rarely combined rigorous semiotic analysis with performative approaches or mixed-methods designs. Peacebuilding research often emphasized elite or state-led initiatives, under-theorizing grassroots youth agency. Digital religion studies (Campbell, 2013) examined identity construction but offered limited insight into minority strategies in constrained environments. By providing a triangulated, contextually grounded account, this study offers higher-order interpretations that move beyond description toward explanatory models of symbolic agency under real-world constraints.

The practical implications of these findings are particularly relevant for Iran. Educational institutions and interfaith organizations should develop programs that build semiotic and performative literacy among youth. Curricula could include modules on ethical symbol redesign, culturally resonant visual storytelling, and safe digital practices. Given the small size of the Christian community, such initiatives must prioritize protective frameworks that safeguard minority visibility while encouraging majority sensitivity and responsibility. Youth-led digital projects deserve institutional support, including training in secure platform use and resources for collaborative content creation. Rather than focusing solely on formal theological dialogue, Iranian interfaith efforts could benefit from investing in co-

creation workshops where young people design and share hybrid symbols and low-profile rituals.

Technology platforms operating in Iran, particularly Telegram, have a role to play. Features that support culturally coded collaborative content while maintaining strong privacy protections could enhance constructive engagement. Policymakers and cultural authorities might consider recognizing youth symbolic practices as valuable contributions to social harmony and national cohesion. By supporting rather than restricting these creative expressions, Iran could harness the energy of its large youth population for positive interfaith relations.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The sample was predominantly urban (Tehran and Isfahan), which may not fully capture the experiences of rural youth. Although the Christian subsample reflects demographic reality, its small absolute number limits deeper comparative analysis within that community. Self-report measures and digital trace data are inevitably influenced by social desirability and self-censorship, which are common in Iran's political and digital environment. The study captures the digital ecology of 2020–2021 and cannot account for subsequent technological or regulatory developments. Finally, as with all research in sensitive settings, some participants may have moderated their responses due to legitimate safety concerns.

These limitations point to several productive directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the sustainability of re-signification practices and their translation into long-term attitude and behavior change. Multi-site research including smaller cities and rural areas would improve representativeness. Comparative studies with other countries hosting small Christian minorities in Muslim-majority contexts would test the transferability of the model developed here. Participatory action research designs that position youth themselves as co-researchers could further empower participants while generating richer, more grounded data. Scholars should also examine how evolving digital technologies and policy changes after 2021 influence the possibilities and constraints of sacred re-signification in Iran.

In conclusion, this mixed-methods study affirms that Iranian youth — both from the Muslim majority and the small Christian minority — possess remarkable creative capacity and strategic wisdom. Facing significant structural constraints, they have developed sophisticated visual, digital, and performative strategies that quietly transform sacred symbols into resources for relational peace. Their work represents not grand political resistance but persistent, culturally embedded labor toward coexistence. By re-signifying the sacred, these young people bridge theological and cultural differences while honoring Iranian identity and maintaining necessary caution.

The framework of re-signification of the sacred offers both a theoretical lens and a practical pathway for understanding and supporting grassroots interfaith efforts in constrained contexts. As Iran continues to navigate questions of religious pluralism, national identity, and digital governance, the semiotic and performative labor of its youth deserves greater recognition and thoughtful support. Their practices demonstrate that even in challenging

environments, meaningful reconciliation can emerge through creative, careful, and deeply human acts of symbolic redesign.

Ultimately, this research calls upon scholars, educators, religious leaders, and policymakers in Iran to see youth not as passive recipients of interfaith policy but as active architects of peaceful coexistence. By investing in their creative potential — through education, safe digital spaces, and cultural encouragement — Iran can harness one of its greatest resources: a large, digitally fluent, and spiritually engaged youth population committed to building bridges across religious lines. The semiotic labor documented in this study, though quiet and careful, carries profound potential to shape a more harmonious future for Iran's diverse religious communities and offers valuable lessons for other societies facing similar challenges of pluralism and constraint.

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