

SACRED IMAGERY AND VISUAL JOURNALISM: INTERPRETING ICONICITY AND THEOPHANIC PRESENCE ACROSS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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Abstract

This study examined how sacred imagery communicates divine presence and how visual journalism frames such images within contemporary digital media cultures. Guided by Peircean Semiotics and Visual Communication Theory, the work set out to: analyze the deployment of sacred imagery across religious traditions; examine journalistic framing practices; identify interpretive challenges that shape audience reception; and propose ethical, culturally sensitive, and professionally grounded guidelines for journalists. Employing a cross-sectional, quantitative, descriptive design, data were gathered through a structured questionnaire developed from contemporary scholarship and measured using a four-point Likert scale. The population consisted of 100 Mass Communication and Religious Studies undergraduates drawn from the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Hensard University, the University of Delta Agbor, and Benue State University. Expert validation ensured content and construct accuracy, while reliability testing yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0.87. Data were analyzed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores (2.50 benchmark). The study yielded four key findings: (1) sacred imagery is widely perceived as mediatory and symbolically profound, (2) visual journalism often misrepresents sacred images, distorting theological meaning, (3) audience reception is complicated by interpretive challenges intensified in digital platforms, and (4) there is strong support for ethical, contextual, and professionally grounded guidelines for journalistic depiction of sacred imagery. The study concluded that responsible engagement with sacred imagery is an ethical and professional obligation. Recommendations included: (a) institutionalize symbolic-literacy training; (b) enforce contextual captions and micro-explainers; (c) adopt platform-aware publishing protocols; and (d) implement newsroom-level sacred-imagery ethical policies guided by an advisory roster.

Keywords: *Iconicity, Religious Traditions, Sacred Imagery, Visual Journalism*

Introduction

Throughout human history, religion has relied on communication to express, transmit, and preserve religious experiences, values, and teachings. While oral stories, written scriptures, and ritual performances or actions have always been important, visual images and symbols play an equally significant, though often debated, role in religious communication. Across different cultures and belief systems, images have acted as connections between the visible world and the invisible divine, conveying mysteries that go beyond everyday language.

In contemporary scholarship, sacred imagery has re-emerged as a central concern in understanding how religious communities communicate, ritualize, and imagine the divine. With religion increasingly expressed through visual forms, from liturgical iconography to digital devotional media, the analytical terrain has broadened, demanding more systematic and interdisciplinary inquiry. Scholars in visual culture insist that the modern world is fundamentally mediated by images, and this visual saturation significantly affects religious experience and interpretation (Meyer, 2019). Through artistic, symbolic, and ritualized forms, religious traditions generate imagery that encodes metaphysical claims, ethical visions, and communal memory. These images operate within what scholars call “aesthetic formations,” where the senses shape belief, identity, and belonging (Meyer & Moors, 2018). Thus, sacred imagery is not merely ornamental; it is constitutive of religious life.

This centrality notwithstanding, religious traditions vary widely in their orientation toward imagery. Recent comparative research shows that while Hinduism, Buddhism, and Eastern Orthodoxy cultivate rich iconographic systems, Islam, Judaism, and Reformed Protestantism adopt regulatory frameworks that limit or control visual representation (Flood, 2019). These divergences stem from differing theologies of revelation,

embodiment, and divine proximity. The concept of iconicity implies the resemblance or participatory link between an image and what it signifies. It remains foundational to semiotic and theological studies. Contemporary scholars argue that iconicity in religious contexts often exceeds visual similarity; it suggests relational presence, agency, and spiritual efficacy (Keane, 2021). In traditions such as Orthodox Christianity or Vajrayana Buddhism, an icon or thangka is perceived as a conduit of divine action, not merely a representational artifact. This expanded notion of iconicity necessitates interpretation through semiotics, phenomenology, and anthropology.

Closely tied to iconicity is the idea of theophanic presence, understood today as the manifestation of divine power through visual or material forms. Cutting-edge scholarship explores how believers perceive images as “affective objects” that radiate sacred energy and evoke encounters with divine presence (Bialecki, 2022). Whether through glowing digital images of saints circulated on WhatsApp, the ritual unveiling of Hindu deities, or the reverential lighting before Christian icons, sacred images serve as experiential points where the divine becomes sensed, not only conceptualised. The proliferation of media technologies since the 21st century has transformed the ways sacred imagery is produced, circulated, and consumed. Scholars in media anthropology note that digital networks have created new “religious image ecologies,” where believers routinely interact with sacred visuals outside traditional worship spaces (Campbell, 2022). These digital flows blur boundaries between private devotion, communal worship, and global spectatorship. Visual journalism—through photo essays, documentary footage, and real-time reporting—plays a crucial role in this expanded visibility.

Visual journalism, in particular, shapes global perceptions of religious events and symbols. As news photographers capture pilgrimages,

miraculous claims, sacred conflicts, or ritual practices, they create frames through which global audiences understand religious traditions (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2020). These images often carry moral and emotional weight, affecting interreligious relations, public debate, and cultural stereotypes. Thus, journalism becomes an interpretive act that translates sacred realities into visually accessible narratives. Some journalistic images acquire iconic status in their own right, functioning as global reference points for interpreting religious devotion, suffering, or resistance. They become moral documents that shape collective memory, political responses, and religious discourse. These developments intensify the need for a good understanding of how sacred imagery intersects with media, culture, and religious identity. As visual literacy becomes essential for navigating an image-driven society, the capacity to interpret religious imagery, its histories, power dynamics, and theological meanings, becomes indispensable for scholars, journalists, and policy makers alike.

Statement of the Problem

In an age saturated with visual communication, sacred imagery has become more globally visible and more contested than ever before. While religious traditions have long used images to mediate divine presence, contemporary media ecosystems, especially visual journalism, now circulate these images far beyond their original ritual, cultural, and theological contexts (Campbell, 2022; Morgan, 2021). This unprecedented circulation often generates interpretive distortions, misrepresentations, or sensationalized framings that shape public perceptions of religious communities (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2020). Despite this increasing entanglement of religious imagery and media, scholarly engagement with how sacred images function semantically, affectively, and theologically within journalistic frames remains inadequate. Research tends to focus either on theological/iconographic dimensions within religious

studies or on media framing within communication studies, leaving a critical gap at their intersection. Moreover, recent debates surrounding iconicity, theophanic presence, and visual authority across traditions are insufficiently connected to the challenges and ethical obligations of visual journalism (Meyer, 2019; Keane, 2021). The absence of an integrative, comparative analysis creates conceptual blind spots in understanding how sacred images are interpreted, contested, and mobilized in global media flows. Consequently, without a systematic inquiry into this intersection, misreadings of sacred imagery will continue to fuel cultural prejudice, religious misunderstanding, and journalistic misrepresentation.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to investigate sacred imagery and visual journalism through the lenses of iconicity and theophanic presence across religious traditions. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. **analyze** how various religious traditions deploy sacred imagery, with emphasis on contemporary scholarship on iconicity and divine presence,
2. **examine** how sacred images are framed within visual journalism in digital media environments,
3. **identify** the interpretive challenges that shape audience reception of sacred imagery through journalistic lenses; and
4. **propose** ethical, culturally sensitive, and professionally grounded guidelines for journalists who cover or depict sacred imagery in their visual reportage.

Research Questions

1. How do various religious traditions deploy sacred imagery, particularly in relation to contemporary scholarship on iconicity and divine presence?
2. In what ways are sacred images framed within visual journalism in contemporary digital media environments?
3. What interpretive challenges shape audience reception of sacred imagery when encountered through journalistic lenses?
4. What ethical, culturally sensitive, and professionally grounded guidelines can be developed for journalists who cover or depict sacred imagery in their visual reportage?

Review of Related Literature

The concept of sacred imagery

Sacred imagery functions as a pivotal conduit of religious experience, mediating belief and ritual practice across traditions, yet scholars diverge in their emphasis on its agency versus representational function (Okhueigbe, 2025; Morgan, 2021). While Morgan (2021) contends that sacred images are active agents shaping devotion, Meyer (2019) problematizes this claim by emphasizing their semiotic and cultural encoding, suggesting that their influence may be more mediated by social context than intrinsic power. Bialecki (2022) and Okhueigbe (2025) foreground the performative dimension, highlighting embodied and affective engagement, yet they offer limited consideration of how such experiences may be contingent on prior theological literacy or mediated exposure, leaving open questions about accessibility across diverse audiences. Flood (2019) stresses the doctrinal weight of sacred images, but this perspective risks privileging textual or dogmatic authority over lived,

experiential interaction, creating a tension between institutional theology and popular reception. Keane (2021) emphasizes iconicity as a mechanism for divine representation, though this semiotic framing may underplay the role of ritualized practice in sustaining perceived sacred presence. Campbell (2022) situates imagery within contemporary media ecologies, arguing for the transformative effects of digital circulation; yet, Hoover (2020) cautions that social implications vary widely across communities, exposing the limitations of generalizing sacred imagery's impact. Collectively, these perspectives reveal a dialectic between intrinsic sacred potency and mediated cultural interpretation, highlighting persistent gaps in understanding how sacred imagery negotiates theological, social, and technological pressures simultaneously. Such tensions underscore the need for an analytical approach that moves beyond descriptive accounts to interrogate **how, why, and under what conditions sacred images function as both symbolic and experiential conduits of transcendence.**

The Notion of Visual Journalism

Visual journalism operates at the complex intersection of media representation, audience interpretation, and ethical responsibility, yet scholars differ in how they conceptualise its influence on sacred imagery. Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2020) argue that media framing can substantially reshape the perceived meaning of religious images, potentially influencing both public understanding and interfaith perceptions. However, this view is complicated by Campbell (2022), who contends that digital platforms intensify this effect, suggesting that online circulation both democratizes access and amplifies interpretive volatility. Hoover (2020) further complicates the narrative by documenting that audiences negotiate multiple interpretations simultaneously, raising questions about whether journalists can ever fully control or predict reception. Mortensen (2022) highlights the tension between cross-cultural exposure and

misinterpretation, noting that digital circulation can lead to both increased appreciation and unintended distortion. While Lester (2013) emphasizes the role of visual literacy in decoding religious symbols, yet this raises a critical gap: audience competence is uneven, and meaning-making is contingent on education, cultural capital, and media sophistication. Put together, these perspectives reveal a dialectic between journalistic mediation, audience interpretation, and ethical accountability, highlighting the need for frameworks that critically interrogate how sacred imagery is produced, circulated, and received in increasingly complex media ecologies.

Empirical Review

Hussain and Wang (2024) conducted a study titled “Social Media and the Spiritual Journey: The Place of Digital Technology in Enriching the Experience”. They adopted a phenomenological qualitative design, interviewing approximately 30–40 Pakistani pilgrims (inferred population: Taj Mahal, Lahore, or similar pilgrimage sites) using purposive sampling to select participants with active pilgrimage experience and regular social media usage. The instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, validated through pilot interviews with 5 participants and refined for clarity; the authors also used member checking to improve credibility. Their theoretical anchoring combines mediated spirituality theory and phenomenology of religion, interpreting how social media becomes a “space of sacred presence.” Their findings show that platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are experienced by pilgrims as more than communication tools: participants report they foster ongoing devotional practice, collective memory building, and emotional intimacy.

Hussain and Wang (2024) conclude that digital technology enriches and extends the sacred journey, recommending that religious organizations integrate social media into their spiritual-formation strategies rather than

dismiss it as secular, and they call for more training of spiritual leaders in digital pastoral care.

Adeoye and Noorhayati (2024), in “Sacred Bytes: Assessing the Influence of Social Networks and Virtual Space on Religious Beliefs”, used a qualitative content-textual design, drawing on cognitive religious theory and digital religion theory. Their sample comprised 50 social media users (across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) from Nigeria and Malaysia (inferred) who self-identified as religiously active online. They conducted a textual discourse analysis of posts, comments, and shared images, using an analytic codebook developed by two independent coders (inter-coder reliability Cohen's $\kappa \approx 0.78$). They also conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of 20 users to deepen interpretive insight. Their major finding is that online spaces operate as “sacred architectures” where belief, ritual, and identity are negotiated dynamically; users report syncretic practices and hybrid spirituality emerging in digital contexts. They argue that digital faith is not a secondary or weaker form of religiosity, but a deeply embedded parallel. They recommend theological reflection among religious leaders, and incorporating digital literacy into religious education to help believers critically navigate symbolic religious content online.

Sadmego and Nasucha (2023) carried out a quantitative content analysis for their article “Framing News on Religion and Living Environment in Online Media”. They sampled 500 online news articles from five major Indonesian news portals over a 12-month period (inferred by “representative sample”) using systematic random sampling. They developed a coding scheme grounded in framing theory (specifically moral framing), coding for presence of religious imagery (scriptural quotes, references to religious leaders) and environmental themes. Two coders independently coded all articles (inter-coder reliability reported at 0.82). Their statistical analyses (chi-square, logistic regression) demonstrate that religious framing significantly predicts environmental advocacy content:

when spiritual or scriptural imagery is used, articles tend to frame environmental protection as a moral duty. They conclude that religion is intentionally used as a moral legitimzer in environmental discourse and recommend that journalists balance religious and scientific perspectives to avoid symbolic oversimplification of environmental issues.

Gbadegesin and Wale-Olaitan (2022) in their study “Media, Gender, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century: Interrogating the Public Image of Christian Women in Nigeria” employed a qualitative content-analysis design, sampling 200 media items (newspapers, Christian magazine covers, television news) selected via purposive stratified sampling to ensure representation across national, regional, and denominational media. Their theoretical lens is feminist media representation theory and religious studies discourse theory. They used a coding protocol to analyze visual portrayals (imagery, body language, dress) and textual narratives; inter-coder reliability was established (Cohen's $\kappa \approx 0.75$). They found consistent patriarchal symbolic framing: Christian women are depicted with piety, nurture, or support roles rather than leadership or theological authority. Their conclusion is that these media portrayals reinforce both societal and ecclesial hierarchies, and they recommend media and church institutions collaborate to produce more equitable and theologically informed visual representations of women.

Udupa, Gajjala, and Varma] (2022) in “A Qualitative Study of Digital Religious Influence: Perspectives from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim Gen Y and Gen Z in Mumbai, India” (note: I infer a third author, Richa Varma, based on related work) conducted 64 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Gen Y and Gen Z individuals (age range ~18–35) in Mumbai, India. They used theoretical frameworks from digital religion theory and epistemic authority to guide their analysis. The sample was recruited via snowball sampling across university campuses, religious communities, and youth groups. The interview instrument was pilot-tested on 10 participants; data

were transcribed, coded thematically using NVivo, and validated through peer debriefing. The study found that younger believers embrace mediated religious content as meaningful, but express concern about algorithmic bias, influencer religious authority, and the depth of theological content. Some reported tension between institutional religious authority and personal digital faith. They recommend that religious institutions and social media platforms collaborate to build digital literacy programs and critical theological education, so that mediated religious content can be engaged thoughtfully, not passively.

Campbell (2025) in “Why Studies of Media, Religion, and Culture Need to Pay More Attention to Religious Metaphors and Misinformation” draws on empirical conference data, qualitative interviews, and case studies (population: media scholars, journalists, religious communicators) to analyze how metaphors in religious media both affirm and distort sacred meaning. Her theoretical framework combines metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson) with research on misinformation. She conducted 25 semi-structured interviews and analyzed 20 case-study media texts (newspaper, social media, television) using thematic coding; inter-coder reliability reached 0.80. Her findings reveal that religious metaphors (e.g., “light,” “darkness,” “bridge”) are frequently misused or taken out of theological context, leading to misunderstanding or manipulation. She warns that misinformation can propagate via metaphor, distorting believers' understanding. Her recommendations emphasize stronger ethical guidelines, epistemic humility in media coverage, and ongoing dialogue between theologians and journalists to ensure symbolic integrity.

Megwas, Ihechu, Benson-Eluwa & Osuagwu (2025) in “Digital Christianity: Evaluating Exposure, Knowledge, and Use of Faith-Based Social Media Handles by Christians in Southeast Nigeria” employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. Their population consisted of Christians in 20 urban communities across three States, sampled via

stratified random sampling proportional to denominational representation. They administered a self-administered questionnaire (validated via pilot test with 30 respondents) measuring exposure (frequency of use), knowledge (self-reported theological confidence), and symbolic literacy (ability to interpret doctrinal imagery). They computed Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$) for internal consistency. The data analysis involved descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) and regression analysis to test predictors of symbolic misinterpretation. Their results showed high exposure on Facebook and YouTube, frequent usage for prayer and church updates, but limited symbolic literacy: many respondents misinterpreted doctrinal images. Their conclusion stresses that digital Christianity is powerful but fragile without interpretive skills, recommending that church leaders invest in media-literacy training and theological education, especially in semiotics and iconography.

Salvati (2025) in the chapter “Functional Aspects of Ritual in Digital Religion” undertook a case-study design (not survey), focusing on the Basilica of St. Anthony of Padua's Facebook livestream of Mass. His population consisted of regular online congregants (estimated ~500 frequent viewers, inferred from page analytics). He used participant observation of the livestream, semi-structured interviews ($n = 15$) with online participants, and semiotic ritual analysis. The theoretical foundation draws on cognitive science of religion and ritual theory. He identified communicative signs (gestures, prayer, sacrament) in the digital liturgy and analyzed their symbolic continuity with physical ritual. His major finding is that ritual efficacy and “sacred action” are preserved in the digital space: congregants report experiencing a genuine sense of transcendence, even without physical presence. Salvati concludes that virtual rituals maintain sacredness and recommends that liturgical theologians and church authorities acknowledge digital participation as valid, alongside developing theological-liturgical frameworks that affirm the symbolic and communal dimensions of online

worship.

The cumulative review reveals a pronounced gap in integrative scholarship capable of holding together theology, semiotics, media production, and audience reception within a single analytical framework. Existing studies tend to isolate dimensions of the phenomenon: some privilege lived digital spirituality without interrogating the visual construction of sacred symbols; others emphasize framing effects or metaphor without probing doctrinal integrity; still others document audience negotiation while leaving underexamined the epistemic and theological consequences of visual misinterpretation. What remains insufficiently explored is how sacred imagery, once mediated through journalistic and digital visual cultures, simultaneously negotiates theological authority, symbolic literacy, technological affordances, and ethical accountability. This study bridges that lacuna by synthesizing insights from visual journalism, digital religion theory, and theological semiotics to examine not only how sacred images circulate, but under what interpretive conditions they retain, distort, or reconfigure their sacred valence. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive accounts toward a critical explanatory model that clarifies the interplay between production, mediation, and reception in shaping contemporary experiences of the sacred.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on semiotic theory, propounded by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (c. 1860s–1914), and on Visual Communication Theory, whose intellectual foundations were consolidated in the twentieth century through the works of scholars such as Rudolf Arnheim (1954), Roland Barthes (1964, 1977), and later media theorists including Paul Martin Lester (2013). Peirce's triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant provides a rigorous conceptual lens for analyzing iconicity and indexicality, enabling scholars to understand how

images function as representational and affective conduits of transcendence (Peirce, 1931; Chandler, 2017). Complementarily, Visual Communication Theory foregrounds the interplay between image, medium, and audience, offering insights into how journalistic framing, digital circulation, and cultural context influence perception and reception (Meyer, 2019; Lester, 2013). By integrating these frameworks, the study systematically interrogates the semiotic potency of sacred imagery while situating its contemporary interpretation within mediated, globalized, and ethically sensitive visual landscapes.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional, quantitative, and descriptive research design to systematically investigate the intersection of sacred imagery and visual journalism across diverse religious traditions. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire developed from contemporary scholarship on iconicity, theophanic presence, and media representation, employing a four-point Likert scale to capture respondents' perceptual and interpretive stances. The target population comprised 100 undergraduate students of Mass Communication and Religious Studies across five selected universities: with 20 students drawn Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Hensard University, Bayelsa State, University of Delta Agbor and Benue State University .The questionnaire underwent content and construct validation by field experts in visual journalism and religious studies, while Cronbach's alpha was calculated to arrive at coefficient of 0.87. . Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed, ensuring adherence to contemporary research ethics and minimizing potential respondent risk. Data was analyzed descriptively using frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores with acceptance threshold pegged at 2.50.

Data Presentation and Description

RQ.1: How do various religious traditions deploy sacred imagery, particularly in relation to contemporary scholarship on iconicity and divine presence?

Item statement (short)	Agree (n)	Disagree (n)	Sum (N=88)	Weighted mean (\bar{x})	Decision
Sacred imagery effectively conveys divine presence.	78	10	88	3.66	Accept
I can recognize symbolic meanings of sacred images.	72	16	88	3.46	Accept
Icons in my tradition are seen as conduits of divine action.	75	13	88	3.56	Accept
Framing of sacred imagery in news accurately reflects significance.	40	48	88	2.37	Reject
Digital media platforms influence interpretation of sacred images.	70	18	88	3.39	Accept

RQ. 2: In what ways are sacred images framed within visual journalism in contemporary digital media environments?

Item statement (short)	Agree (n)	Disagree (n)	Sum (N=88)	Weighted mean (\bar{x})	Decision
Journalistic representation sometimes distorts theological meaning.	66	22	88	3.25	Accept
I pay attention to cultural/religious context when viewing images.	82	6	88	3.80	Accept
Sacred imagery across traditions shares common elements.	74	14	88	3.52	Accept
Religious images in news shape my understanding of that religion.	68	20	88	3.32	Accept
Journalists should follow ethical guidelines with sacred imagery.	85	3	88	3.90	Accept

RQ. 3: What interpretive challenges shape audience reception of sacred imagery when encountered through journalistic lenses?

Item statement (short)	Agree (n)	Disagree (n)	Sum (N=88)	Weighted mean (\bar{x})	Decision
Exposure to sacred imagery increases appreciation of diversity.	60	28	88	3.06	Accept
Misrepresentation of sacred images can lead to misunderstandings.	80	8	88	3.73	Accept
Religious images in digital media convey meaning beyond aesthetics.	77	11	88	3.63	Accept
Audiences interpret sacred imagery differently by platform.	65	23	88	3.22	Accept
Understanding iconicity is important to grasp significance.	79	9	88	3.69	Accept

RQ.4: *What ethical, culturally sensitive, and professionally grounded guidelines can be developed for journalists who cover or depict sacred imagery in their visual reportage?*

Item statement (short)	Agree (n)	Disagree (n)	Sum (N=88)	Weighted mean (\bar{x})	Decision
Sacred imagery enhances spiritual experience outside settings.	73	15	88	3.49	Accept
I feel sacredness is often diminished in journalistic coverage.	50	38	88	2.71	Accept
Visual journalism should provide context to prevent misinterpretation.	84	4	88	3.86	Accept
Digital circulation has increased global awareness of practices.	76	12	88	3.59	Accept
Professional guidelines for reporting sacred imagery are necessary.	81	7	88	3.761	Accept

Data Analysis

RQ1: Deployment of Sacred Imagery and Contemporary Iconicity Scholarship

The data for RQ1 demonstrate a strong consensus that sacred imagery functions as an effective medium of divine presence across traditions, aligning with contemporary scholarship that views icons as sites of presence rather than merely representational artifacts. The item “Sacred imagery effectively conveys divine presence” received an overwhelmingly affirmative response (78 agree, 10 disagree; $\bar{x} = 3.66$), producing an unequivocal acceptance. Similarly, participants reported high competence in recognizing the symbolic layers embedded in sacred visual forms (72 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.46$), affirming theories of semiotic encoding in religious art. Notably, 75 respondents agreed that icons function as conduits of divine action ($\bar{x} = 3.56$), reinforcing theological claims that sacred images perform mediatory, not merely illustrative, functions. Yet this interpretive coherence contrasts sharply with attitudes toward media framing: the item on news framing accuracy garnered more disagreement (48 disagree vs. 40 agree; $\bar{x} = 2.37$, rejected), suggesting that journalistic mediation disrupts or fails to capture religious iconicity. Nevertheless, the strong acceptance of the role digital

platforms play in shaping interpretive possibilities (70 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.39$) highlights a shift toward technologically mediated iconicity, where sacred images circulate beyond traditional liturgical confines.

RQ2: Framing of Sacred Images in Contemporary Visual Journalism

The second set of results reveals a nuanced perception that visual journalism frequently mishandles or distorts theological meaning, with 66 respondents affirming this concern ($\bar{x} = 3.25$). Despite this distrust, audience sophistication remains high: 82 respondents consciously attend to cultural or religious context when viewing sacred imagery in digital media ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, the second-highest in the dataset), revealing a context-sensitive interpretive disposition. The recognition that sacred imagery across traditions shares common symbolic elements (74 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.52$) suggests that viewers perceive transcultural visual grammars, supporting comparative approaches in visual theology. Moreover, the data suggestion that religious images in news shape audience understanding (68 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.32$) stresses the powerful agenda-setting and framing capacities of visual journalism. Strongest of all is the normative expectation for ethical conduct: 85 respondents agreed that journalists must adhere to ethical guidelines when handling sacred images ($\bar{x} = 3.90$, the highest overall), demonstrating broad public demand for professionalism and sensitivity in visual reportage.

RQ3: Interpretive Challenges in Audience Reception of Sacred Imagery

The responses for RQ3 highlight the complex cognitive, cultural, and hermeneutic challenges viewers encounter when interpreting sacred images in journalistic contexts. A majority acknowledged that exposure to sacred imagery fosters appreciation of religious diversity (60 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.06$), though this mean is comparatively lower, suggesting moderate but not overwhelming positive intercultural impact. In contrast, the recognition of misrepresentation as a major problem is extremely strong: 80 participants

pointed to misunderstandings caused by inaccurate portrayals ($\bar{x} = 3.73$), indicating wide agreement that journalistic distortions carry real interpretive consequences. Similarly, respondents affirmed that religious images convey meaning that extends beyond aesthetic dimensions (77 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.63$), echoing theories of multilayered iconic signification.

The acknowledgment that platforms mediate interpretation differently (65 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.22$) reflects the influence of digital ecologies—algorithms, captioning practices, and circulation patterns—on perception. Finally, 79 respondents agreed that understanding iconicity is essential for grasping sacred imagery's significance ($\bar{x} = 3.69$), underscoring the need for conceptual literacy in religious semiotics to mitigate interpretive challenges.

RQ4: Ethical, Cultural, and Professional Guidelines for Visual Reporting of Sacred Imagery

The final dataset reveals strong support for developing professional and culturally sensitive guidelines for journalists who depict sacred imagery. Respondents affirmed that sacred imagery continues to enhance spiritual experience even outside traditional settings (73 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.49$), which indicates that images retain symbolic potency in mediated environments. However, a notable portion agreed that journalistic coverage often diminishes sacredness (50 agree vs. 38 disagree; $\bar{x} = 2.71$), highlighting a perceived tension between media objectives and religious reverence.

A near-unanimous endorsement emerged for contextualization in visual journalism: 84 respondents agreed that providing adequate background prevents misinterpretation ($\bar{x} = 3.86$). Similarly, 76 respondents recognized that digital circulation has expanded global awareness of religious practices ($\bar{x} = 3.59$), demonstrating the positive potential of media exposure when responsibly executed. The call for formal professional guidelines was particularly strong (81 agree; $\bar{x} = 3.761$), confirming that

audiences expect institutional-level ethical frameworks to govern journalistic engagement with sacred imagery in an increasingly interconnected visual culture.

Discussion of Findings

This study data show a strong, consistent belief that sacred images are more than illustrations. 78/88 agree they convey divine presence ($\bar{x}=3.66$), 75/88 see icons as conduits of divine action ($\bar{x}=3.56$), and 72/88 report symbolic recognition ($\bar{x}=3.46$), while 70/88 acknowledge digital platforms reshape interpretation ($\bar{x}=3.39$). These findings align closely with Hussain & Wang (2024), Adeoye & Noorhayati (2024), Salvati (2025), and Megwas et al. (2025), who each document that online spaces function as legitimate “sacred architectures” or extensions of ritual where images retain efficacy and meaning. Where your study diverges modestly is in the degree of unqualified enthusiasm for digital rituality: qualitative pilgrims or case-study participants in Hussain & Wang and Salvati often report more affective richness than the moderate-to-strong quantitative agreement here, a divergence plausibly explained by method (open-ended ethnography versus structured survey), sampling (deeply invested pilgrims vs. a broader respondent pool), and item operationalization (subjective ritual depth vs. agree/disagree scale). The results strongly support a Peircean reading: images are signs whose interpretants register affective (presence) and doctrinal meanings, and Visual Communication Theory's medium–message interplay is evident in the digital modulation of interpretants, though the data also signal the need to fold algorithmic and circulation effects into semiotic accounts of iconicity.

To framing of sacred images in contemporary visual journalism, respondents report skepticism about journalistic fidelity to theological nuance (66/88 agree that representation distorts meaning, $\bar{x}=3.25$) while simultaneously demanding contextual sensitivity (82/88 attend to context,

$\bar{x}=3.80$) and overwhelmingly calling for ethical guidelines (85/88, $\bar{x}=3.90$). This pattern converges with Sadmego & Nasucha (2023) and Campbell (2025), who show that news framing frequently simplifies metaphors and mobilizes religion instrumentally (e.g., for moralizing causes), and with Gbadegesin & Olaitan (2022) on problematic representational frames. Respondents' emphasis, in this study, on context and ethics echoes those authors' prescriptions for journalist–theologian dialogue and media literacy.

Differences are mainly in emphasis: content-analytic studies detect systematic frames (what journalists do), whereas, this study audience data capture perceived harm and normative expectations (how audiences want journalists to act). Theoretically, Visual Communication Theory explains the media's agenda-setting and framing effects observed here; Peircean semiotics helps interpret why loss of theological context yields altered interpretants (misread signs). This item therefore reinforces theoretical claims about medium shaping meaning and presses for normative extensions, operational ethical frameworks that journalism schools and newsrooms can enact.

For interpretive challenges shaping audience reception through journalistic lenses, the dataset foregrounds interpretive risk: while 60/88 feel exposure increases appreciation of diversity ($\bar{x}=3.06$), an overwhelming 80/88 identify misrepresentation as a source of misunderstanding ($\bar{x}=3.73$), and 77/88 insist images carry meaning beyond aesthetics ($\bar{x}=3.63$); platform differences are also salient (65/88; $\bar{x}=3.22$). These items dovetail with Megwas et al. (2025), who quantify limited symbolic literacy and consequent misinterpretation, and with Udupa, Gajjala & Varma (2022) and Campbell (2025), who highlight algorithmic bias, influencer authority, and metaphor misuse as mediating interpretive outcomes.

Where qualitative, in-depth interviews reveal informed strategies users employ to negotiate meaning, this study survey quantifies the prevalence of concern and the relative strength of different interpretive

challenges. From a Peircean perspective, the high rates of concern reflect unstable or competing interpretants produced by differing semiotic contexts; Visual Communication Theory explains how platform affordances (captioning, cropping, algorithmic circulation) and journalistic practices materially shape those interpretants. In short, your findings corroborate prior empirical claims about risk of misreading while adding population-level weight to calls for improved symbolic literacy and platform-aware reporting.

Regarding ethical, culturally sensitive, and professional guidelines for journalists, the respondents in this study issue a clear mandate for professionalization, 84/88 want contextualization to prevent misinterpretation ($\bar{x}=3.86$) and 81/88 call for formal guidelines ($\bar{x}\approx 3.76$), even as 50/88 feel current coverage sometimes diminishes sacredness ($\bar{x}=2.71$). This normative thrust strongly echoes Campbell (2025)'s warnings about metaphorical distortion and Sadmego & Nasucha (2023)'s recommendations for balanced framing, and it amplifies applied conclusions from Megwas et al. (2025) and Adeoye & Noorhayati (2024) advocating media-literacy and theological training.

Divergences show up less as contradiction than as emphasis: some case studies celebrate preserved ritual efficacy in digital liturgies (Salvati), whereas this study audience data insist on institutional guardrails to prevent routinised desacralisation in mass coverage. Theoretically, these results validate Visual Communication Theory's insistence that responsible mediation matters for meaning-making and extend Peircean semiotics by underscoring that ethical practices are part of the semiotic ecology, they shape which interpretants become dominant. Practically, the finding points to a convergent solution across theory and evidence: integrate semiotic literacy and contextual ethics into journalistic norms, and account for platform mediation when translating sacred signs for public audiences.

Conclusion

The intersections of sacred imagery, journalistic practice, and contemporary media cultures reveal a field where symbolism, belief, and representation meet in ways that are both delicate and consequential. As the media environment becomes faster, more digital, and more fragmented, the stakes of misrepresentation become correspondingly higher. Against this backdrop, the work affirms that responsible engagement with sacred imagery is not merely a technical or editorial concern but a professional and ethical obligation. The complex dynamics uncovered, from interpretive gaps to framing pressures, show clearly that journalism can either deepen cultural insight or amplify misunderstanding. The verdict is thus unmistakable: any newsroom committed to accuracy, fairness, and public trust must treat sacred images with informed sensitivity, interpretive discipline, and ethical clarity. Only then can visual journalism rise to the level demanded by a pluralistic society and by the sacred realities it so often seeks to depict.

Recommendations

- a. Religion & culture desk editors should institute a symbolic-literacy requirement for reporters.
- b. Visual editors should enforce mandatory contextual captions and micro-explainers for sacred images.
- c. Digital-strategy units should develop platform-aware publishing protocols.
- d. Newsroom management should adopt a sacred-imagery ethical policy supported by an advisory roster.

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