FROM THE INTERNET TO THE EVERYDAY -
AN EXPLORATION OF VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PEACE

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Recent escalations of violence in conflicts such as those in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan have brought war to the forefront of political and social debates. Today, conflicts are increasingly mediated through the Internet and digital platforms, and scholars are examining the complex relationship between online connectivity and rising political violence, whether Internet access alters conflict dynamics, how digital platforms are weaponized, and other related questions (Gohdes, 2018). The mediatization of modern conflicts also produces an incessant stream of images that reach audiences worldwide in real time. Therefore, images of conflict and war have been studied intensively over the past decades (see, e.g., Gilboa, 2007; Griffin, 2010; Schlag & Geis, 2017); and their impacts, ranging from shaping audience interpretations to influencing political attitudes and even contributing to instability, have been examined in research on information warfare (see, e.g., Hameleers, 2025; Theisen et al., 2025). In contrast, studies on peace imagery remain limited, which is a surprising gap given images' ability to shape public perception (Altinay, 2017; Clark, 2022; Grittmann, 2012), evoke emotions, and convey immediacy and authenticity often absent in the text (Lobinger, 2019). If peace is included in visual scholarship, it is mostly analyzed within a binary war-peace paradigm (Ersoy, 2016; García Duque & Casadiego, 2021; Lee & Maslog, 2005), which, at times, may simplify the complex realities of conflict-affected contexts (Mitra, 2014; Shields, 2017). In this vein, recent peace research underscores the need to recognize diverse, coexisting forms of peace, reflecting the complexities of post-war societies and the importance of local peacebuilding efforts (Gusic, 2022; Marijan, 2017). This perspective challenges conventional Western-centric peace models, advocating grassroots engagement and participatory approaches, such as the concept of "everyday peace" (Firchow, 2018; Mac Ginty, 2021).

This paper proposal aims to enhance the understanding of coexisting forms of peace by exploring different image repertoires of peace. The concept of image repertoire refers to the broad range of material artefacts of visual communication utilized to convey meaning (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Lobinger et al., 2020; Prieto Blanco et al., 2022). In the quest to (better) visualize peace, we examined images selected and shared by over 200 peacebuilding experts, employing image-type analysis to categorize and interpret recurring motifs. Our findings reveal that expert-chosen images depict a diverse range of peace representations, moving beyond conventional symbols to highlight the nuances of everyday peace.

While these locally embedded variations of forms of peace may contribute to more meaningful visual representations, our visual understanding of peace is still largely shaped by online communication and, thereby, a few key players (White, 2019). In this regard, scholars have long highlighted the power of search engines, tools that millions rely on daily for information, in shaping public opinions. Search engines are not only technically but also politically relevant, as their algorithms introduce biases and discriminatory patterns, thereby forming stereotyped information environments (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Kay et al., 2015; Magno et al., 2016). Hence, visuals retrieved through online searches become more than incidental; they are integral to understanding how peace is imagined and circulated globally. To explore this visual repertoire, we performed an image search on Google Images, the most-used image search engine (Rogers, 2019). It included 15 keywords related to peacebuilding, such as "peace", "social justice", or "conflict resolution", and collected 300 images per keyword. After excluding low-resolution images (primarily icons), we examined the remaining 1,724 images.

A major challenge in visual communication research lies in analyzing large volumes of images while maintaining analytical depth. To address this, various approaches that blend quantitative breadth with qualitative insight have been developed and refined in recent years, including image-type analysis (Grittmann, 2019). This method combines quantitative image analysis with qualitative interpretation and has been widely applied in different contexts (Ammann et al., 2010; Bernhardt & Liebhart, 2017; Brantner et al., 2020; Pentzold et al., 2019). Image-type analysis systematically examines the meaning of motifs and the role of images in shaping societal knowledge, thereby identifying both dominant and marginalized motives and grouping similar ones into corresponding types (Grittmann, 2001; Grittmann & Ammann, 2011; Lobinger, 2012). In our study, an open sorting method was applied to classify images into inductively developed types (Brantner et al., 2020; Fincher & Tenenberg, 2005). The resulting types were then iteratively revised and tested through multiple sorting rounds to ensure internal consistency. Subsequently, qualitative analysis and interpretation were used to explore the characteristics of each image type, focusing on broader categories rather than individual images. This approach enables the examination of a large number of images without sacrificing detailed visual analysis (Brantner et al., 2020).

When analysing the data, we link visual communication to the latest findings in peace research and examine the online image searches in relation to the expert-selected images. This comparative lens helps situate the collected visual material and allows for

conclusions about the typical motifs associated with peace.

Our findings suggest that the dominant image types in global image search results include symbols, text-as-image, and politicians' handshakes. Symbols, such as doves, flags, and clasped hands, often resemble stock photography and thus convey a sense of generic simplicity (Aiello et al., 2025; Anderson et al., 2025; Frosh, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2025). Although these depictions circulate widely and are instantly recognizable, they are ultimately reductive, obscuring the complex, situated, multidimensional, and frequently mundane character of diverse forms of peace into easily digestible tropes. The handshake of politicians is a common image type and recurring visual trope in the realm of visual political communication. The motif, as Salvadó et al. (2021) note, typically symbolizes progress toward peace between conflicting sides. Their study found a variation of this motif that emerged within journalistic photography of international politics: the "triangle" composition (Salvadó et al., 2021), in which a third figure stands behind the handshake. This image type is also common in our sample, for example, in the iconic signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC. Interestingly, the third actor serves both as a witness to the gesture and as a powerful key actor (Salvadó et al., 2021). Overall, the image type features remarkable visual consistency across different contexts and time periods. While the handshake image type features human beings, the vast majority of images in our corpus do not. Similarly, in the expert-selected images, the most dominant image type is "untouched nature", where no people are depicted, thereby visually aligning with the concept of "negative peace" (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). In other words, the absence of humans becomes a symbolic representation of peace.

In conclusion, our study highlights two key contributions. First, it demonstrates the importance of extending peace research beyond text-centered approaches by integrating visual methodologies. Second, it underscores the value of combining expert surveys with digital research to capture diverse viewpoints and examine complex and abstract concepts. Our findings further point to the need to incorporate locally grounded perceptions of peace into broader peace communication efforts to enrich and diversify its visual repertoire. To move beyond simplistic symbols and embrace multifaceted imagery, this and related studies (Goetschel et al., 2025) advocate for a more comprehensive, nuanced, and inclusive approach to define peace visuals that do not rely on the negative lens of war imagery.

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