

BENCHMARKING

JURNAL MANAJEMEN PENDIDIKAN ISLAM

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AS A HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND WRITTEN MESSAGES IN THE LIFE OF CAIRO SOCIETY

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Abstract

Received: 11-07-2026
Revised: 13-01-2026
Accepted: 10-09-2026

The social environment plays a strategic role in character formation through indirect educational mechanisms—often referred to as the "hidden curriculum." From an Islamic educational perspective, the presence of religious symbols and messages in public spaces serves as a medium for internalizing Islamic values outside of formal educational institutions. This study aims to examine the function of the social environment as a hidden curriculum for Islamic education by analyzing religious symbols and written messages found in various public spaces across Cairo. Adopting a qualitative approach utilizing phenomenology, the study gathered data through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation at various public locations. The data were analyzed using Clark Moustakas's phenomenological approach, supported by triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that religious symbols—such as calligraphy, Quranic verses, supplications *do'a*, and invocations *dzikr* displayed on public transport, private vehicles, and in commercial spaces—serve not merely as markers of religious identity but also as educational media that continuously instill Islamic values. Through processes of interaction, interpretation, and habituation, these symbols foster religious consciousness and encourage the strengthening of faith *aqidah*, acts of worship, spiritual experiences, Islamic understanding, and behavior aligned with Islamic teachings.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Islamic Education, Social Environment, Religious Symbols, Public Space, Cairo

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INTRODUCTION

The social environment is a crucial element in human character formation; beyond the influence of parents, social interactions—such as friendships—have a significant impact on an individual's growth and character development. Consequently, the environment functions as a "hidden curriculum." A hidden curriculum can be defined as values or lessons absorbed indirectly by observers or listeners. According to Michael W. Apple, the hidden curriculum is understood as a mechanism that indirectly reproduces societal values, ideologies, and power structures through the educational process. (Hikmat, 2024). Meanwhile, the social environment is defined as the setting where an individual interacts in their daily life, such as within the family, school, and community (Tamara, 2016).

The three key elements mentioned above serve to improve the individual; the family acts as the primary environment shaping character and personality, while the school

provides education and fosters discipline through established rules and socialization. Meanwhile, the broader community-particularly peers, with whom there is frequent direct interaction-influences behavior, interests, and lifestyle. Society itself serves as the source of the norms, culture, and social rules that act as life's guiding principles. (Aisy & Salsabilla, 2025).

A harmonious balance among the three key elements mentioned above-family, friends, and the surrounding environment-must be maintained in accordance with established standards. UNICEF reports that many children aged 2-4 worldwide still lack adequate stimulation and interaction within the home environment. Approximately 40% of children do not receive responsive care involving sufficient stimulation, while about 10% do not engage in simple activities with parents or caregivers-such as reading books, storytelling, singing, or drawing. Furthermore, over 80 million children do not play with their caregivers, and more than 90 million children under the age of five lack play materials that support the learning process. Such limitations can negatively impact a child's cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development. A home environment that fosters child development is characterized by the active involvement of parents or caregivers in providing early stimulation. (Unicef, 2026).

These findings indicate that the educational process is not confined to formal institutions but also unfolds within social environments that provide indirect learning experiences. In the context of Islamic education, the social environment can be viewed as a form of hidden curriculum a process of value internalization occurring outside the formal curriculum. Religious symbols and written messages present in community life have the potential to serve as educational tools that instill Islamic values and implicitly shape individual attitudes and behaviors. (Hidayah et al., 2025). Therefore, examining the social environment as a "hidden curriculum" in Cairene society is crucial for understanding how religious symbols and written messages serve as media for non-formal education, influencing the internalization and practice of Islamic values in daily life.

In fact, a similar study has previously been conducted by Baktiar Nasution, titled "Curriculum (*Manhaj*) from the Perspective of Islamic Education: A Study of the Written Curriculum and the Hidden Curriculum." His research concluded that improving the quality of human resources can be achieved through effective education delivery, continuous training, and the placement of educators based on their specific competencies. Through these strategies, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) are expected to produce graduates who possess not only intellectual capabilities but also strong character, and who are capable of playing an active role and benefiting society. (Nasution, 2018). Furthermore, Aviah Asmaul Husna and Rahman Hamid conducted research on a similar theme titled "Integration of the Hidden Curriculum into the Disciplinary Values of Students at Pondok Pesantren Putri Salafiyah." They concluded that the hidden curriculum is a vital component of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) education system, as it complements the formal curriculum in shaping the students' character. (Husna & Hamid, 2025). Finally, Nurhasanah also conducted research on the "hidden curriculum," concluding that the implementation of the curriculum aims to shape students' character through its application within the school environment (Nurhasanah, 2020). A key difference between the three previous studies and the current one lies in the setting. The earlier studies were conducted within school environments, where students are generally more compliant with established rules. In contrast, this study examines a curriculum implemented in an informal educational context-which has an unintended impact on the character development of the community-and takes place outside of formal educational institutions, specifically in public spaces (such as cafés) and modes of transport like *tremco* and ride-hailing services (e.g., Uber, Didi, inDrive) in Cairo.

This study aims to explore the role of the social environment as a "hidden curriculum" in Islamic education, focusing on the religious symbols and written messages present in the daily life of Cairo's society. It seeks to identify the various forms of symbols and messages emerging within the social sphere and to understand the meanings that the community constructs around them. Furthermore, the study aims to explain how these religious symbols and written messages serve as vehicles for the natural internalization of Islamic values in everyday life, thereby contributing to the shaping of the community's character, attitudes, and religious practices.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to examine how the community interprets religious symbols and written messages found in public spaces as a form of "hidden curriculum" within Islamic education in Cairo (Sumilih et al., 2025). This approach is employed because the research focuses on gaining a deep understanding of people's experiences and interpretations regarding a social phenomenon. Through a phenomenological perspective, the study seeks to reveal how social space functions as a medium for non-formal education, indirectly shaping and transmitting Islamic values through various visual representations, religious texts, and social activities that emerge in daily life.

Data collection was conducted using field observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation techniques (Khairunnisa et al., 2026). Primary data were obtained through direct observation of various public spaces in Cairo and semi-structured interviews with informants selected via purposive sampling. Additionally, secondary data were gathered through a literature review encompassing academic books, journal articles, prior research, and documents related to the concepts of the "hidden curriculum," Islamic education, and the social dynamics of Cairo's society. Observations were employed to understand the forms, contexts, and presence of religious symbols-along with public responses to them-while interviews served to explore the informants' subjective experiences and interpretations in greater depth. The data analysis process employs Clark Moustakas's phenomenological approach, encompassing the stages of *epoché* (bracketing), horizontalization, clustering of meaning, textural description, structural description, and description of the essence. (Hasan, 2023).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Public Spaces as Effective Media for Conveying the Hidden Curriculum

The effectiveness of public spaces as a medium for transmitting the "*hidden curriculum*" is inseparable from their close connection to the daily lives of the community. Unlike formal education systems-which operate through curricular frameworks, structured learning, and planned pedagogical interactions-the educational process within social spaces unfolds indirectly through individuals' experiences, observations, and engagement with their surrounding environment (Giroux & Penna, 1979). People build understanding and acquire values through the process of observing, reading, interpreting, and experiencing the various forms of social reality present in their lives (Brien, 2011). In the context of Islamic education, the process of internalizing values occurs not only through formal institutions-such as schools, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), or mosques-but also through various religious symbols and messages found in public spaces, including streets, markets, transportation facilities, commercial centers, and residential areas. Continuous interaction with these religious representations gradually shapes religious consciousness, reinforces

the understanding of Islamic values, and influences societal behavioral patterns in social life (Syahroni & Rofiq, 2025).

From the perspective of the sociology of education, Cairo's public spaces can be understood as social arenas that play a strategic role in shaping, maintaining, and disseminating religious values (Kadir et al., 2024). Cairo's historical position as a center of Islamic civilization establishes the city not merely as an administrative, economic, and political hub, but also as a cultural space that reflects the religious identity of its people (Raymond, 2000). The Islamic tradition that has evolved throughout the city's history is reflected in various forms of religious expression present in public spaces-whether through visual symbols, religious texts, or other forms of social communication. These symbols serve not merely as elements of the urban aesthetic but also fulfill an educational function in shaping the community's moral orientation and spiritual awareness (Kulik et al., 2022). The messages embodied in the symbol serve as a medium for reinforcing Islamic values-such as the cultivation of moral character, honesty, patience, social concern, and responsibility-as well as fostering an awareness of the relationship between human beings and God.

The presence of religious messages in the public sphere demonstrates that Islamic education can take place through visual communication mechanisms that are open and accessible to all segments of society (ANDERSO, 1958). Various forms of religious writing found on buildings, information boards, vehicles, business premises, and public facilities serve as a medium for conveying values that transcend age, education level, or specific social backgrounds. The repeated delivery of messages through these symbols fosters a process of habituation that gradually shapes the community's collective consciousness (Pedwell, 2017). In this context, the public sphere can be viewed as a form of "social educator" that performs an educational function without the formal structures characteristic of the teacher-student relationship. Islamic values are transmitted through everyday experiences, enabling people to learn naturally from the social environment in which they interact (Dalimunthe, 2023).

Furthermore, Cairo's public spaces serve not merely as mediums for conveying religious messages but also as arenas for the processes of meaning-making, reproduction, and the evolution of religious culture. The public is not merely a passive recipient of the religious symbols present in their environment; rather, they are active agents who interpret these symbols based on their respective life experiences, social backgrounds, and religious understandings. The interaction between the public and religious symbols fosters an interactive learning process, as Islamic values are continuously comprehended, interpreted, and manifested in social practices. Consequently, the concept of a "hidden curriculum" within public spaces refers not only to the material presence of symbols but also encompasses the social processes that enable these symbols to hold educational significance for the community.

From a phenomenological perspective, the role of Cairo's public spaces as a medium for a "hidden curriculum" can be understood through the lived experiences of people who continuously interact with a social environment steeped in religious values. The acts of observing, interpreting, comprehending, and responding to religious symbols form part of a gradual and ongoing process of value-based consciousness building. Thus, Cairo's public spaces can be viewed as sites of Islamic education that transcend the boundaries of formal institutions, as they facilitate a process of value transformation through everyday social experiences.



Figure 1. Written message on public transport.

The image above displays Islamic messages addressed to every reader; these inscriptions were intentionally placed on public transport vehicles-specifically *tremcos* (a type of shared minibus), buses, and ride-hailing taxis-observed and documented by the author. The text conveys to passengers and readers that, regardless of the circumstances, prioritizing Allah is a fundamental Islamic teaching that should be steadfastly upheld at all times and in all places.



Figure 2. The Quran inside the car

The second symbol is the Qur'an, placed inside private vehicles as well as those used for work (such as ride-hailing cars like Uber). An interview with AB (a ride-hailing driver) revealed that having the Qur'an in his car holds a special appeal and brings good fortune to the owner. He also explained that he occasionally reads the Qur'an during quiet periods-when there are few passengers or while taking a break on the roadside. This practice extends beyond the vehicle; people selling roadside wares, such as tissues, are also occasionally seen reading the Qur'an while sitting by the street.



Figure 3. Religious symbols in a café.

Figure 3 illustrates the use of religious symbols in a café interior, manifested through the display of Arabic calligraphy and Quranic verses on the walls. Calligraphy of the *Syhadah* serves as the primary visual element, while other wall sections feature excerpts from the Quran integrated with landscape illustrations. The presence of these inscriptions demonstrates that Arabic functions not merely as a decorative element but also as a representation of religious identity within a commercial space.

Discussion

Religious Symbols and Written Meanings in Public Spaces as Representations of the Hidden Curriculum in Islamic Education

Research documentation reveals that religious symbols and various written messages with Islamic themes are distributed throughout Cairo's public spaces, becoming an integral part of daily life. These symbols are found not only in locations traditionally associated with religious observance but also on public transport, private vehicles, and in commercial spaces such as cafés. Figure 1, for instance, displays various forms of religious messages-such as the name of Allah, the *Bismillah* phrase, travel prayers, and other Islamic expressions-positioned on the dashboards, windshields, and interiors of public transport vehicles. Meanwhile, Figure 2 illustrates the display of Quranic verses on private vehicles, and Figure 3 shows the use of calligraphy featuring the *Syahada* and Quranic verses as part of a café's interior design. These findings demonstrate that religious symbols have become embedded in the social landscape, appearing across the diverse spaces where the people of Cairo interact, work, and go about their daily activities.

From the perspective of Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism, the existence of these symbols cannot be understood merely as aesthetic embellishments or visual identities. Blumer states :

"Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. I wish to discuss briefly each of these three fundamental premises." (Blumer, 1966).

Focusing on the first premise, Blumer's statement explains that human action toward an object is based on the meaning that object holds for the individual. This meaning is not innate; rather, it is formed through social interaction and subsequently re-understood through the individual's process of interpretation. Thus, the meaning of religious symbols does not arise solely from their visual form, but rather from a shared awareness developing within society regarding the symbol's significance. Inscriptions of the name "Allah," Quranic verses, or prayers displayed on vehicles acquire meaning as representations of religious values because the Muslim community perceives them as reminders to maintain spiritual awareness in every activity.

The findings in Figure 1 show that religious symbols are placed in areas of the vehicle easily visible to both the driver and passengers during the journey. This placement indicates that the symbol is not merely an ornament but is designed to engage continuously with anyone inside the vehicle. Within the framework of Symbolic Interactionism, the act of viewing the symbol is followed by a process of interpretation shaped by each individual's religious experiences. A driver might interpret a travel prayer as a plea for God's protection while working, whereas a passenger might view it as a reminder to remain patient, pray frequently, or behave courteously during the trip. These differing meanings demonstrate that the same symbol can yield diverse interpretations, even while stemming from shared religious values.

A similar phenomenon is observed in the display of Quranic verses on private vehicles, as shown in Figure 2. The presence of these verses reveals that the vehicle functions not only as a means of transport but also as a medium for the owner to express their religious identity. As the vehicle moves through public spaces, the symbol attached to it enters the realm of social interaction, becoming visible to other road users. In this context, the vehicle serves as a medium for symbolic communication, conveying religious messages without the need for verbal interaction. Observers will attribute meaning to the symbol based on their own knowledge, experiences, and religious understanding.

Unlike mobile vehicles, religious symbols in a café setting—as seen in Figure 3—offer visitors a more prolonged experience. Calligraphy featuring the *Syahada* and Quranic verses displayed on the walls serves not only to beautify the space but also to cultivate a religious atmosphere that becomes part of the visitor's experience while on the premises. The presence of these symbols can influence how visitors perceive and interpret the space they occupy. Activities such as relaxing, discussing, or working take place in an environment visually imbued with religious messages, ensuring that a spiritual dimension remains present amidst social interactions. This indicates that religious symbols serve to establish a relationship between social space and religious values through a continuous process of interpretation.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that religious symbols in public spaces perform an indirect educational function. (Adi et al., 2025). People do not acquire these values through formal instruction; rather, they absorb them through repeated interactions with symbols encountered in daily life. Drivers who see travel prayers every day, passengers who recite the name of Allah while using public transport, and café patrons accustomed to seeing Islamic calligraphy all gradually undergo a process of internalizing these values. Such recurring experiences shape habits of thought and action aligned with Islamic values, without the need for explicit teaching.

This situation demonstrates a strong connection to the concept of the "hidden curriculum." In educational studies, the hidden curriculum is understood as a process of value transmission that occurs through the culture, environment, patterns of interaction, and habits that evolve within everyday life (Adi et al., 2025). The results of this study indicate that public spaces—such as public transportation, private vehicles, and cafés—indirectly serve an educational function by displaying symbols that convey moral and religious messages. Although these spaces were not designed as educational institutions, the presence of religious symbols transforms them into media that play a role in the process of internalizing Islamic values within society.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the environment is a factor that influences the formation of morals and character (Ainissyifa, 2017). Therefore, the placement of religious symbols in various public spaces can be understood as part of an effort to create an environment that fosters a religious culture and character building. Through continuous interaction with these symbols, the community not only acquires religious information but also develops a moral awareness that is subsequently reflected in their daily attitudes and behaviors (Koto et al., 2026). Thus, public spaces function as learning environments that enable the educational process to take place beyond the confines of formal institutions.

In this regard, the matter is highly relevant to the level of religiosity among Egyptians (Arofah et al., 2021). Several points aligning with the preceding explanation—specifically regarding the "hidden curriculum" element aimed at instilling character values based on Islamic education within the public spaces of Cairo, Egypt—can be observed in the following:

1. From the perspective of *aqidah* (creed), the presence of Islamic symbols in public spaces—such as calligraphy featuring Quranic verses, phrases of *dzikir* (remembrance

of God), and expressions embodying the concept of *tawhid* (divine oneness) serves to reinforce the community's faith in the fundamental teachings of Islam. Constant exposure to these symbols fosters a process of internalizing creed-related values, ensuring that faith is acquired not only through formal education but also through daily life experiences within the social environment. This is further enhanced by the fact that Cairo is home to Al-Azhar University-a globally renowned institution in the Islamic world and possesses a rich history deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition (Gubara, 2104).

2. Regarding the dimension of religious practice, the society of Cairo is characterized by a religious culture that fosters the observance of worship.
3. In terms of lived experience, the interaction between the community and religious symbols and messages fosters a spiritual awareness that reinforces the sense of God's presence in daily life.



Figure 4. Photograph of a middle-aged person reading the Quran while continuing to sell tissues

As shown in the image above, the elderly man entrusts all his needs to Allah throughout his life; even while selling his wares, he keeps Allah in mind by reading the Quran. He recognizes that his purpose in being created on this earth is solely to worship (Tarigan et al., 2024). This is where the essence of living a calm life lies, even though, in reality, every human being still faces challenges.

4. Meanwhile, the dimension of knowledge expands through exposure to Quranic verses, hadiths, words of wisdom, and educational messages found in the public sphere.
5. The dimension of practice is evident in the implementation of Islamic values within the community's social behavior-such as upholding tolerance regarding differences in schools of thought and religious affiliations. (Sukataman et al., 2026).

Based on these findings, it is evident that the religious symbols and written messages found on public transport, private vehicles, and in cafés serve a function that extends beyond the visual. These symbols act as communication media that transmit Islamic values through processes of interaction, interpretation, and habituation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the preceding explanation, it can be concluded that curricular success-particularly regarding character building-does not rely solely on classroom theory but also on the "hidden curriculum." Teachers can implement the hidden curriculum by modeling good behavior and utilizing symbols or written messages placed throughout the environment. When the community and the government actively engage in this practice, it generates a positive impact on the general public. Such efforts have been undertaken in Cairo, Egypt, where religious symbols and written messages are displayed in public spaces; these serve to subconsciously encourage people to do good. If a message conveys a prohibition, the reader feels reminded; if it contains *dzikr* (remembrance of God), the reader feels a sense

of divine oversight, and so forth. Research indicates that this community-driven application of the hidden curriculum in Cairo has positively influenced faith, the quality of worship, the internalization of life values, the acquisition of knowledge in public spaces, and the practical application of the underlying meanings and values.

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