



The Role of Campus Servicescape in Fostering New Student Interest at Islamic Private Universities

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine prospective students' perceptions of the physical appearance and atmosphere of the campus (servicescape) and its impact on their interest in choosing Islamic Private Universities (IPU). Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and were thematically analyzed. The findings revealed four main themes: initial impressions based on cleanliness and Islamic symbols, emotional comfort, representation of Islamic values, and campus aesthetics reflecting institutional professionalism. These four aspects contribute to a positive perception that influences students' interest. The results, supported by subject triangulation, highlight the importance of a calm, religious, and well-organized campus environment in promotional strategies and the development of Islamic character. The implications of this study suggest that the management of campus servicescapes, which reflects Islamic values and creates a comfortable atmosphere, can enhance prospective students' interest in choosing Islamic Private Universities. Therefore, IPUS must focus on cleanliness, aesthetics, and Islamic symbols in its marketing strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Competition among Islamic Private Universities (IPU) in Indonesia, particularly in Sidoarjo Regency, has intensified, prompting each institution to showcase not only academic excellence but also the quality of their physical campus environment. Amid a declining number of high school graduates continuing to higher education, IPU are striving to create a strong and positive first impression on prospective students. One increasingly emphasized factor in attracting interest is the servicescape—the physical environment and atmosphere in which educational services are delivered.

Bitner (1992) defines servicescape as the sum of all physical elements comprising a service setting, including layout, lighting, cleanliness, color, and

other visual cues. In higher education, this includes academic buildings, green spaces, prayer facilities, sports amenities, and classroom interior design. The campus atmosphere subtly communicates the institution's identity and values to visitors. For example, a clean, well-organized campus adorned with strong Islamic symbols is more likely to be perceived as comfortable and aligned with Islamic values by prospective students and their families.

Research by Hami and Abdi (2021) highlights the significant role of visual and atmospheric campus elements—such as open gardens, architectural beauty, and friendly staff—in shaping students' perceptions and initial interest. Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) further argue that consumer perceptions are formed through both visual and emotional stimuli. Often, students make decisions about a university based solely on their first visit. A comfortable, green, and welcoming campus can be enough to spark strong interest.

Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) theory of first impressions explains that people form judgments within the first minute of interaction, which significantly shapes subsequent attitudes and decisions. This is supported by Wahid (2023), who found that prospective students tend to assess a university's overall quality based on their first visit—even before learning about the curriculum or academic standards. Thus, the campus servicescape plays a critical role in shaping institutional image and initial student interest.

In the IPU context, the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of the campus environment also play a vital role. Elements such as campus mosques, Islamic study rooms, religious slogans, and the hospitable attitude of academic staff contribute to a campus identity distinct from secular institutions. Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (2014), through the concept of place identity, explain that physical settings can foster emotional attachment and personal identity. In a study by Hasanah et al. (2020), it was found that prospective students are more attracted to Islamic campuses that visibly reflect Islamic values through symbols, culture, and spatial organization, as these elements align with their personal identity and beliefs.

Additionally, Kotler and Fox (1995) emphasize that campus image is a strategic component of educational marketing. A well-maintained and representative physical environment increases public trust in the institution, while a poorly maintained campus may diminish interest—even if academic quality is high. This is further supported by studies showing that students' initial perceptions of the campus environment strongly correlate with their loyalty and final decision to enroll (Ali et al. 2024; Del Río-Rama et al. 2021).

Despite its significant potential to attract students, servicescape remains an underexplored topic in the context of Islamic higher education. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by using a qualitative approach to explore how

prospective students perceive the campus's physical environment and how these perceptions influence their decisions to enroll in IPU.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design to explore in depth the meaning of prospective students' experiences with campus servicescape elements and how these experiences influence their decision to choose Islamic Private Universities (IPU) in Sidoarjo Regency. A phenomenological approach is selected as it allows the researcher to understand the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions within their real-life context (Sugiyono, 2015).

The participants in this study are prospective students who have previously visited IPU campuses in Sidoarjo, either through campus tours, entrance exams, or promotional activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who could reflectively articulate their experiences and perceptions.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, direct field observations of the physical aspects of the campuses, and visual documentation such as photographs of the campus environment. These methods provided a comprehensive understanding of how the campus setting is perceived by prospective students.

The collected data were analyzed thematically using the framework developed by Miles, M., Huberman (2014), involving data reduction, categorization, and interpretation. Data reduction was conducted by identifying and focusing on the most relevant information from interviews and observations. The data were then categorized into major themes related to perceptions of servicescape, and finally, interpreted to uncover the meaning behind these experiences and how they shape students' interest in enrolling.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employed triangulation of both sources and methods. Source triangulation involved comparing insights from different participants, while methodological triangulation compared data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was also conducted by presenting the interpretations back to the participants to verify that their perspectives were accurately represented.

Through this approach, the study aims to generate a rich and detailed understanding of how prospective students interpret campus servicescape and how this perception influences their enrollment decisions at IPU in Sidoarjo. Furthermore, the findings are expected to provide insights for IPU administrators to strategically enhance their campus environment as part of broader efforts to attract and engage new students more effectively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The aim of this study is to explore in depth how prospective students interpret the concept of servicescape in relation to their interest in choosing Islamic Private Universities (IPU) in Sidoarjo Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven prospective students who had visited several IPU campuses, combined with field observations and visual documentation. The validity of the data was ensured through triangulation of sources (diverse participant backgrounds), techniques (interviews, observations, documentation), and time (data collection conducted in multiple phases and verification sessions).

The thematic analysis of the data uncovered four key themes that significantly shaped prospective students' perceptions of the campus environment. The first theme revolves around the initial impressions formed based on the campus's physical surroundings, particularly its cleanliness and the presence of Islamic symbols. These elements set the stage for how the campus is perceived from the moment students arrive. The second theme highlights the emotional comfort and personal connection students felt within the campus. A welcoming, calm atmosphere contributed to a sense of belonging and peace, which played a vital role in their overall impression. The third theme focused on how the representation of Islamic values within the campus environment was vital. Students noted the importance of seeing Islamic principles reflected in the physical space, which added to the authenticity and relevance of their academic journey at an Islamic institution. Lastly, the campus aesthetics and the overall quality of its design were observed to significantly impact students' perceptions of the institution's professionalism and educational standards. The harmonious and well-maintained environment conveyed a sense of institutional pride and organizational competence, further influencing prospective students' interest.

First Impressions of the Campus's Physical Environment

Most participants reported that their first impression upon visiting a campus strongly influenced their assessment of the institution's quality and credibility. This impression was largely shaped by the physical aspects of the campus, including cleanliness, building layout, lighting, the presence of green areas, and the friendliness of front-line staff.

One participant stated: "I immediately felt at home when I entered the gate. The pathways were clean, the courtyard was spacious, and there was a small, peaceful garden. I thought, this campus must really care about the details. That's important to me."(Participant 1)

This view was supported by another participant who emphasized the role of atmosphere and aesthetics: "When I first came here, I didn't even know what programs they offered. But I really liked the vibe. It felt religious yet modern. The floors were clean, the staff was friendly it immediately felt comfortable." (Participant 2)

A third participant highlighted the importance of lighting and open space: "What I noticed was how bright the campus was, not stuffy at all. Lots of natural light coming into the classrooms. That made me think it must be a comfortable place to study." (Participant 3)

These impressions were formed within minutes and, according to the participants, were difficult to change later. This finding aligns with the first impression theory proposed by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993), which suggests that initial judgments about a place or person tend to stick and significantly influence subsequent decisions. It is not surprising, then, that most participants admitted to immediately comparing the campus they were visiting with others they had previously toured—even before learning about academic offerings in depth.

Even seemingly simple physical elements such as cleanliness, lighting, and open space held symbolic meaning for prospective students. These elements created a perception that the campus was well-managed and reflected Islamic values such as order, beauty, and hospitality. This symbolic interpretation contributed to the development of early trust and interest in IPU institutions.

Emotional Comfort and Personal Connection

The second prominent theme that emerged from the data is the importance of emotional comfort and the personal connection formed through the experience of being in the campus environment. Several participants expressed that a calm, shaded, and well-organized campus atmosphere offered them inner peace and a sense of belonging even during their very first visit.

One participant noted: "I don't just look at the buildings I pay attention to the atmosphere. If it feels calm and comfortable, I feel more confident. After all, I'm going to study here for years." (Participant 4)

This statement illustrates that perceptions of comfort are not merely based on rational evaluation but are also shaped by emotional responses. A sense of inner compatibility is an important indicator in the decision-making process for choosing a university.

Another participant shared a similar sentiment: "I visited another campus that had impressive buildings, but it felt hot and overly crowded. It just didn't feel peaceful. But here, I feel calm like it's the right kind of place for studying and worship." (Participant 5)

Likewise, a sixth participant emphasized that campus atmosphere reflects the values and culture they expect to encounter during their studies: "This campus is quiet, not noisy, and very clean. I feel it suits me because I'm the kind of person who doesn't like crowds. I need a peaceful learning environment, and I felt that immediately here." (Participant 6)

Emotional comfort and the peacefulness of the campus play a crucial role in forming an initial bond between the prospective student and the institution. A serene, orderly, and quiet environment does more than leave a physical impression it also allows prospective students to imagine their future academic and spiritual growth in that setting. Therefore, a *servicescape* that fosters emotional well-being becomes a key element in attracting new students, especially in IPU contexts where values like serenity, etiquette, and balance are held in high regard.

This theme also highlights that prospective students do not base their choices solely on logical factors such as academic programs or tuition fees. Affective considerations like the sense of fit or emotional chemistry with the campus serve as early indicators of suitability. A pleasant physical environment nurtures emotional attachment, which in turn becomes a strong motivational foundation for choosing a university.

During field observations, this emotional connection was evident in how prospective students lingered in garden areas, took photos, or expressed admiration for interior design features such as the library or main lobby. These behaviors suggest that physical spaces can evoke personal emotional experiences, reinforcing the idea that *servicescape* is more than just an external feature it is deeply tied to individual perception and engagement.

Representation of Islamic Values in the Campus Servicescape

Given that this study is situated within the context of IPU, the presence of Islamic values within the campus *servicescape* emerged as a crucial dimension for the participants. Several respondents emphasized that features such as a clean and spacious mosque, active Islamic programs, and the visible presence of Islamic symbols in architectural design and visual media contributed to a sense of trust and comfort toward the institution.

One participant shared: "I'm not only looking for a campus with good facilities, but also one that strongly reflects Islamic values. Here, I saw Qur'anic quotes on the walls, an active prayer room, and lecturers wearing modest Islamic attire. That convinced me." (Participant 6)

(Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (2014) theory of place identity explains that a space which symbolically reflects one's personal values and identity fosters psychological closeness. In this context, an Islamic-oriented

servicescape not only strengthens institutional identity but also creates value resonance with prospective students who come from religious backgrounds.

Moreover, visible Islamic elements such as Arabic calligraphy, dakwah bulletin boards, and public calls to congregational prayers help shape an atmosphere that aligns with spiritual and moral educational goals. These symbols reinforce the idea that the campus is not merely a place of learning, but also a space for cultivating Islamic character.

Campus Aesthetics and Perceived Institutional Quality

The final theme that emerged from the interviews and observations is the role of campus aesthetics in shaping perceptions of institutional quality and professionalism. Participants generally associated a clean, modern, and aesthetically pleasing campus with a well-managed and high-quality institution. "If the campus isn't well-maintained, I start to have doubts. What about the academic management? But if everything looks neat and attractive, I trust that the quality will be good too." (Participant 7)

Another participant compared two Islamic private universities offering the same academic program. Despite one having more extensive academic facilities, the participant was more drawn to the campus that looked modern and visually appealing. This finding highlights the significant influence of visual perception in the decision-making process—especially when prospective students have limited information about the academic content or faculty.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that campus servicescape plays a critical role in shaping prospective students' interest in Islamic Private Universities (IPU) in Sidoarjo Regency. The four main themes identified first impressions, emotional comfort, representation of Islamic values, and campus aesthetics suggest that the physical environment of a campus is not merely a backdrop for education, but also serves as a symbol of the institution's identity and core values.

First impressions of the campus environment emerged as a powerful initial factor in shaping perceptions. Prospective students form impressions within minutes, based on the cleanliness, orderliness, and overall atmosphere of the campus. Servicescape directly influences customer behavior and perceptions (Adrian et al. 2023; Muharram and Hannan 2023; Puspitasari et al. 2022). These findings are supported by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993), who assert that first impressions are formed rapidly and are difficult to change. From an Islamic perspective, attention to one's environment also has theological significance. Allah SWT says in the Qur'an:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْمَحِيضِ قُلْ هُوَ أَذَى فَأَعْتَرِلُوا النِّسَاءَ فِي الْمَحِيضِ وَلَا تَقْرُبُوهُنَّ حَتَّىٰ يَطْهُرْنَ
فَإِذَا تَطَهَّرْنَ فَأْتُوهُنَّ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَكُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ ٢٢٢

".....Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves." (QS. Al-Baqarah: 222)

This verse highlights the importance of cleanliness and order in the life of a Muslim. A clean and well-organized campus environment reflects Islamic values and fosters positive perceptions among prospective students regarding the quality and ethics of the institution. In this regard, Islamic Private Universities (IPU) are not only expected to demonstrate academic professionalism but must also embody the principles of *tahārah* (purity) and order as part of their religious commitment.

Second, emotional comfort and a sense of inner connection to the campus emerged as a strong theme. Prospective students do not solely evaluate institutions based on accreditation or facilities; they also consider how the campus atmosphere makes them feel "at home" or emotionally aligned. This reinforces Schmitt's (1999) concept of experiential marketing, which suggests that emotional responses are often more influential in decision-making than rational analysis. In Islamic thought, inner peace and tranquility are considered divine blessings granted to places that foster goodness and righteousness. Allah SWT says in the Qur'an:

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ سَكَنًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ جُلُودِ الْأَنْعَامِ بُيُوتًا تَسْتَخِفُّوهَا يَوْمَ ظَعْنِكُمْ
وَيَوْمَ إِقَامَتِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَصْوَابِهَا وَأَوْبَارِهَا وَأَشْعَارِهَا أَثْنَا وَمِئَةً إِلَىٰ حِينٍ ٨٠

"And Allah has made for you from your homes a place of rest and made for you from the hides of the animals tents which you find light on your day of travel and your day of encampment; and from their wool, fur and hair is furnishing and enjoyment for a time". (QS. An-Nahl: 80)

The campus, as a "second home" for students, should ideally be a place that provides tranquility—both physically and spiritually. A well-organized physical environment, with lush trees, distance from noise, and green open spaces, fosters a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Such an environment is essential for supporting the learning process, as it enhances concentration and comfort in academic activities while also contributing to students' mental and emotional well-being.

For prospective students, a serene and green campus creates a powerful first impression. They begin to envision the campus as a space conducive to growth—not only intellectually, but also spiritually. In the context of an Islamic

Higher Education Institution (IPU), this sense of tranquility reflects Islamic values that uphold the balance between intellect, heart, and soul. A peaceful environment helps students feel spiritually connected, provides space for reflection, and shapes a learning atmosphere that is humane and dignified. Therefore, a calm and comfortable campus is not merely a physical facility, but an integral part of a meaningful and transformative educational experience (Siswanto & Hadi, 2024).

Third, the representation of Islamic values in campus elements is a key consideration for prospective students. They seek institutions where the visual, symbolic, and environmental aspects reflect Islamic principles—such as the presence of a mosque, Qur'anic calligraphy, and a strong Islamic culture among faculty and students. Research by Mangestuti and Aziz (2023) demonstrates that a religious atmosphere enhances students' emotional attachment to Islamic campuses. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated: *“Cleanliness is part of faith”* (Narrated by Muslim).

Beyond its physical implications, the hadith *“Cleanliness is part of faith”* carries a broader spiritual message, highlighting the importance of creating an environment that visibly reflects Islamic values as a manifestation of faith. In Islamic higher education, campuses that emphasize aesthetics, order, and purity—both in appearance and atmosphere—are not only attractive to religiously inclined students but also serve as effective tools for shaping Islamic character throughout the academic journey. A campus that promotes adab (etiquette), courtesy, discipline, and spiritual serenity will subtly instill Islamic habits into students' daily lives. Thus, maintaining and cultivating a clean, orderly, and Islamic atmosphere is not solely the responsibility of institutional management—it is also part of dakwah bil hal (preaching through action) and a way to create an educational space that enlightens the soul, strengthens morality, and nurtures faith. Such a campus is not merely a place of learning, but a platform for forming a holistic Muslim identity—integrating knowledge, faith, and action.

Fourth, campus aesthetics are strongly linked to perceptions of institutional management and quality. Prospective students interpret a well-organized and visually appealing campus as a sign of a serious and committed educational institution. Conversely, a poorly maintained campus is often perceived as lacking professionalism. Research by Sandyakala (2020) and Wahid (2023) confirms that an institution's visual image greatly influences public perception. In Islam, beauty is considered a spiritual value. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: *“Indeed, Allah is beautiful and loves beauty”* (Narrated by Muslim).

This hadith delivers a profound message that beauty oriented toward goodness is an expression of faith. This principle can be realized through

aesthetically designed campuses that are clean, harmonious, and reflective of Islamic values. Architecture that blends Islamic traditions with modern touches, spatial layouts that ensure comfort and shade, and religious symbols displayed proportionally not only create a pleasing visual impression but also serve as a visual form of *dakwah* that resonates emotionally.

Such aesthetics go beyond superficial beautification they serve as tools for constructing a strong Islamic identity and internalizing spiritual values among the academic community. For prospective students, a beautiful and religiously inspired campus offers a deep emotional and spiritual experience. From an Islamic education marketing perspective, a well-managed and visually appealing campus can become a unique positioning tool that reflects the institution's commitment to integrating faith, knowledge, and practice. In other words, campus beauty becomes a silent yet profound form of *dakwah*.

These four themes demonstrate that students' decisions to choose a university are influenced not only by academic information or financial considerations but also by aesthetic impressions, emotional comfort, and value alignment. This is consistent with the findings of Susilawati et al. (2021), who noted that contemporary students tend to consider both visual and spiritual aspects when selecting a university.

From the perspective of Islamic educational management, these findings highlight the importance of managing the campus servicescape holistically as part of implementing Islamic values in institutional practice. The physical environment should not merely meet infrastructural standards but must be integrated with Islamic symbols, values, and atmosphere to foster the development of *insān kāmil*—a complete individual in terms of intellect, spirit, and morality. This aligns with the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in education, which emphasize *maṣlaḥah* (public welfare) as the ultimate goal. Islamic education is not only concerned with intellectual development but also with safeguarding and nurturing the five essential elements: religion (*ḥifẓ ad-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ an-nafs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-‘aql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ an-nasl*), and wealth (*ḥifẓ al-māl*). In the campus context, a clean, organized, religious, and comfortable environment is a tangible form of protecting students' faith and well-being. Such a campus is not merely a place to study, but also a space for character and spiritual development.

Therefore, the servicescape of an Islamic campus is not just a facility—it is a form of religious expression (*syiar*), an educational tool, and a strategic instrument for instilling Islamic identity in students from the outset. Managing the physical environment becomes part of the intellectual and spiritual trust that must be carried out with professionalism, aesthetic sensitivity, and spiritual depth.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the campus servicescape plays a crucial role in shaping prospective students' perceptions and interest in Islamic Private University. The first impressions formed by the physical elements of the campus, along with the emotional comfort experienced, are key factors in the decision-making process. A clean, organized, peaceful environment that reflects Islamic values has been shown to create a strong emotional bond and a sense of compatibility for prospective students. Therefore, holistic management of the campus servicescape is essential not only to support marketing strategies but also to foster Islamic character development from the very beginning of students' academic journeys.

The main limitation of this study lies in its scope, which is confined to a single geographic area (Sidoarjo Regency), and its qualitative approach, which focuses on individual experiences, making the findings less generalizable. Future research is recommended to broaden the geographical scope, adopt quantitative or mixed-method approaches, and further explore the long-term relationship between campus servicescape and student engagement.

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